



# PAUL NUGENT MATERIALIST



LORD DODD GRIFFITH FARRAR & CO









*Paul Nugent—Materialist.*

## MR GLADSTONE ON 'PAUL NUGENT.'

DEAR MADAM,—I have read with great interest and careful attention the work entitled 'Paul Nugent, Materialist,' which has been so kindly presented to me. I need hardly say that I sympathise with the purpose of the writers to uphold the commanding claims of positive belief in God, in the soul, in Christianity, and in the Church, and so expose the fallacies of the hybrid and unreal system set up by 'Robert Elsmere.' And it appears to me that the points of the argument, as between belief and negation, are in general very tersely, ably and justly stated; while, being confined within narrow bounds, they do not injuriously load the movement of the narrative. If this opinion of mine serves to commend to others a work conceived with so much courage and wisdom, I shall be very glad. I do not think I shall be able to improve upon it by a more elaborate review.—I remain, dear Madam, with every good wish, your very faithful and obedient.

---

'There can be no question as to the tolerance and breadth of view displayed by the joint authors in treating the important subjects of their interesting work.'—*Morning Post*.

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'It is a splendid book, written with quite refreshing enthusiasm. The characters are well drawn, the arguments are advanced with convincing authority, and we have no hesitation in saying that, whilst it will interest the general public by its love story, it will do more to strengthen half-hearted Christians than many a dry work on theology.'—*Life*.

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'There is a brightness and skill about the texture of the plot, and an unflagging attractiveness in the characters, which are sure to make the novel popular.'—*Rock*.

'"Paul Nugent" is a book well worth reading.'—*Western Daily Press*.

*Paul Nugent—*  
*Materialist*

BY

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AND THE

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LONDON

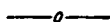
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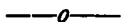


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# *Paul Nugent—Materialist.*



## *THE PROLOGUE.*

### CHAPTER I.

#### A LOVE MATCH.

A SMALL golden ring, as is well known, can be a more unbearable fetter than a pair of iron handcuffs; and marriage under some aspects may be an infinitely worse fate than the famous mill at Marseilles, in which the Emperor Maximian's satellites used to grind obdurate Christians to powder.

It was no comfort to Paul Nugent to know that he had brought this detestable fate upon himself. On the contrary, it exasperated him to be obliged to confess that he, in all the pride and strength of his manhood, had been as weak as any schoolboy fresh from the pleasant laxities of Eton. He met Perdita Verschoyle at Hurlingham, when they were both supposed to be looking on at a polo match between the 10th Lancers and the 11th Hussars; but he was looking at her—and she, with blue eyes full of lazy interest, was looking at—some one else, and therein lay her charm. Her careless bow when her fussy mother introduced him surprised and nettled him into sudden interest, for he was tired of the quick,

admiring glances which his beauty always won for him before he had time to speak a word. He was as fond of being appreciated as any other man, but it seemed to him that the cast of his features mattered little, compared with the cast of his character or his intellect. He had no personal conceit, but he held his head high, and was proud to think there was a good deal in it.

And yet Paul Nugent fell in love with silken lashes drooping over marvellous blue eyes, and coral lips which smiled as sweetly as possible, but never said anything worth hearing. Perhaps it was the consciousness that he would have to fight against a dozen rivals which led him on, for Miss Verschoyle had crowds of admirers, and he was never so happy as when engaged in an arduous struggle. His love took possession of him like a summer madness, and, wild with the longing for possession, he lived for a few months in a fevered dream, like any poor lunatic in Bedlam, who sits on a bench in the sun, and dreams himself a Lord Chancellor on the woolsack. His passionate wooing bewildered her, and overpowered all her capacities for resistance. She was rather glad to think that her lover was considered clever by the rest of her small world; but, unlike him in every respect, her chief source of pride in Paul Nugent was the faultless line of features, which made his the most noted face in the Row. She was incapable of the smallest appreciation of his higher qualities, and she considered herself on a perfect equality with one of the first scholars of the day, because of the trivial fact that the girls of her acquaintance looked after him, as the men with more audacity ran after her.

And to such a woman as this Paul Nugent gave his whole heart.

It was a pitiful satire on the rest of his life, for the intellect on which he prided himself more than on any other possession was dethroned from its seat of power, and, as it were, shunted ignominiously into the background, whilst all the softer feelings, which he generally considered of so small account, were allowed full play. He would take no answer but 'yes,' and when that cheerful monosyllable was whispered on his shoulder, he felt prouder of his prize than Columbus when he discovered a new world.

He was so sure of his happiness, that he was not afraid to take his bride straight home to The Thickets, a small property near by in Essex, which came to him through his mother. It was a pretty place, near the small town of Z., and he had flown to it eagerly, as the only spot on earth where he could be sure of an uninterrupted *tête-à-tête* with his lovely wife. Could any folly be greater?

Perdita's highest ambition had been to have a prettier frock than any other girl of her acquaintance, and she had taken care to provide herself with a vast quantity of fascinating toilettes in her trousseau. But what is the good of the most entrancing gown that was ever conceived by the imagination of a first-rate milliner, if there is nobody to die of envy? There was absolutely no society in Z. A few carts rattled up and down its one long street, but it was generally so intensely and funereally silent, that a dog's bark sounded like an impertinence.

'Will nobody come to call?' asked Perdita, as she stood at the breakfast-room window, forming



a pretty picture, with her yellow hair and her pale blue gown, a pretty, wistful look in her forget-me-not eyes, and an ugly weed of discontent growing up within her bosom.

'No, thank heaven, not a chance,' said Paul fervently, though he had no belief in the heaven he so casually invoked. 'In this snug little place of ours there isn't a soul to drop in except Mr Whittaker the parson, who would shudder himself into a blue ague if he had to enter the house, or the doctor, who knows I am too confoundedly healthy to be any good to his pocket.'

'But are there no girls—no ladies of any sort, however old?' she asked in dismay, as she thought of all her finery wasted in this desert.

'None,' with a cheerful smile, 'unless you call Dr Goodwin's sister a lady. She's a fearful female, with shiny black love-locks plastered across her forehead.'

Perdita shrugged her shoulders.

'There will be no good in changing my dress. I shall keep this one on,' her heart sinking in cold despair. She leant her head against the framework of the window, as she thought of those gay little teas at Hurlingham, when the men crowded round her like the bees round their queen, and the women were nearly mad with jealousy at the beauty of her frocks; or that other day at Henley, when she floated down the river, with some one whom she rather liked, talking nonsense to her in the moonlight, and little Jack Mosely singing, 'Be queen of my heart to-night,' as he shot past her in his canoe.

She could hear the boyish tenor dying away in the distance; she could see the lights of the

numberless house-boats flashing across the waters. She was in the full enjoyment of the life—the fun, the undercurrent of excitement, and she woke with a start to find herself alone with Paul Nugent, in the dullest house in the world!

‘What shall we do to-day?’ he was asking, in a cheerful, matter-of-fact way, as if he had a host of things to propose.

‘There is nothing to do,’ not caring to raise her eyes to his, but stretching out her hand to pick a rosebud, and then chewing the stalk to pieces with her small white teeth.

‘My dear child, how can you say so? I could drive you over Horsley Common, and round by Fell-day Woods; or else we could take the lower road, cross the river by Bolton Bridge, and catch the finest view of the castle, with the hills as a background.’

The programme seemed a splendid one to him, especially with that golden head close to his side, as a very charming adjunct to the beautiful scenery.

But there was no rapture in Perdita’s face as she drew her brows together, and threw away the rose that she had so wantonly spoiled.

‘I wish you would understand, once for all,’ she began petulantly, ‘that one or two fellow-creatures would be a thousand times more interesting to me than all the castles in the world.’

A shade crossed Paul’s face, but he laid his hand upon her shoulder with an indulgent smile.

‘You prefer common clay to the stones of by-gone centuries? Well, shall we stroll down to the village? I might carry a basket, and you should play Lady Bountiful.’

‘Thanks; where would be the fun? By fellow-creatures I mean the people who wear good

coats on their backs, or pretty gowns, who can talk of the things that interest me, and laugh, and have fun. I've nothing in common with paupers,' she added, with a toss of her head, and a spiteful flash from her lovely eyes.

'The people here are not paupers,' he said indignantly. 'They are honest, hard-working creatures. They would slave themselves to death rather than go into the workhouse, and be supported for nothing.'

'I daresay,' with a cold smile. 'Rob a poor man of his beer, and is there anything left him to live for?'

'They are not a set of barrels,' he answered gravely. 'They have no minds, perhaps, but they've hearts, like you and me, Per,' his voice softening. 'And do you think, if we were forced to live apart, our first thought would be if they would put a stopper on our liquor?'

'No, of course not; but we are different,' drawing herself up, as if she were a superior being. 'Have you no friends, Paul?'

'Yes, plenty, only I don't want them just yet,' his face flushing; 'and they live at a distance.'

'They don't seem in a hurry to find you out.'

'They haven't an idea that we are here.'

'It's all your fault, because you don't go to church,' she said, as if she had made a discovery. 'I know down at home we never used to know if the Castle people were back, until we saw them in their pew. I shall go to-morrow.'

'Don't,' drawing her to his side. 'I shall have such a dull morning. You never used to go in London.'

'Yes, I did—sometimes. Here I shall go regularly; it will be something to do.'

The words jarred upon Paul, unbeliever as he was.

'Sit here, and talk to me; there will be no hypocrisy about that,' he said, as he kissed her soft white forehead.

She drew herself away brusquely, and looked up into his face with an offended air. It was the first home-truth he had ever spoken to her, and she did not approve of it at all.

'Hypocrisy, Paul!' she exclaimed, drawing down the corners of her mouth.

'Yes, I mean it,' softening the words with a smile, but too innately honest to be able to withdraw them. 'You are supposed to go to church for some religious sort of service, I believe, and if you go from any other motive, there is a certain amount of hypocrisy, isn't there?'

'You know nothing about it at all,' she said, with supreme contempt, glad to find some subject on which she could assert her superiority to her husband. 'You are nothing but an atheist,' and she flounced out of the room, quite forgetful of the fact that she generally took care to make a graceful exit.

Paul shrugged his shoulders and went off to the library, where he promptly found consolation for his temporary sense of disappointment and alienation in his beloved books. The old charm fell upon him as soon as he found himself in his wonted chair; but when the luncheon gong roused him to the duties of everyday life, he remembered with a pang of surprise that he had quite forgotten his wife's existence for at least two hours. As he walked to the door with a slow, reluctant step, he might have guessed that the scales were already falling from his eyes, and that his love-dream was over.

## CHAPTER II.

### DISAPPOINTMENT.

MRS PAUL NUGENT was rightly called Perdita, for she gravitated downwards like the lost souls in Dante's Inferno. When her husband discovered that she could sympathise in nothing that interested him most, he took to shutting himself up in the library for gradually increasing intervals. As soon as the period had gone by for a conversation consisting chiefly of terms of endearment, he began to find that he and his wife had not one thought in common. If he had been awake to the duties of his position as a married man, he would have taken care to provide some sort of entertainment for her, as soon as he found that his own society was not all sufficiency ; but, manlike, he engrossed himself in his own pursuits, and then wondered why she had so little to say to him when they met at meals. Poor Perdita had nothing to do, and nothing to think of but a past which was gone out of reach, like a child's shoe washed away by the tide. The county families were very slow in calling, and Perdita, accustomed to the *sauce piquante* of fashionable life, thought them 'deadly slow' in every other way. Still she brightened up a little when Paul, with the air of a martyr, drove her about the country in his high mail phaeton to return their visits. If there were a few men in the room, the conversation was kept up briskly,

and Perdita was the life and soul of the party ; but if not, it dwindled into a series of exhaustive platitudes, till Paul would get up in despair and say they could not keep the horses waiting any longer.

‘Per, my dear girl, why can’t you talk to the women?’ he said one day, as they were driving home in the gathering dusk, and he was feeling especially mortified because he knew that his wife had made a bad impression on Lady Morgan, who was considered the oracle of the county.

‘It’s not my *métier*,’ she said affectedly, as she drew her sable boa closer round her soft white throat. ‘Men have always understood me—women never.’

Paul frowned. There was something in the little speech which irritated and offended him exceedingly. He had never objected to Miss Verschoyle’s turning the cold shoulder on any amount of women, and devoting her whole attention to Paul Nugent; but he wished to be the only man with whom she could get on so very easily, and he knew that the women of the neighbourhood would soon pass sentence on her, and refuse to admit this pretty, coquettish little bride into the inner sanctum of their intimacy.

‘You open like an oyster as soon as a man comes near you,’ he said testily, ‘and you never give the women a chance. Do you know that sort of thing is not considered good form down here?’

‘As if I cared what a parcel of old women thought of me,’ she answered rather shrilly, as the hues of the sunset gathered in her cheeks. ‘They are horrid, stiff, sour old cats, and I don’t want to see any of them again.’



'But you will feel rather dull without any of them,' he said gravely, for it had been borne in upon him by that crucial test—personal experience—that dulness was possible even with the prettiest wife in England for your companion; and, having gone so far on his own account, he was kind enough to think that she might have made a step in the same direction.

'Captain Mayhew said he would ride over to see what is the matter with the little pug,' she answered, with a smile of conscious pride, 'and that long-legged Mr Ashton said he would be charmed to mark out our tennis-lawn. He is going to lunch with us to-morrow.'

Paul gave the chestnuts a savage cut with the whip, which sent them down the road at a mad pace. They nearly dislocated his wrists, but he managed to get them under control. At the same time he was trying to regain a thorough mastery over himself. When he was sure that he could speak without passion—and the horses had subsided into a moderate trot—he turned to his wife, with an expression in his eyes that she had never seen there before.

'What is the matter with Bogie?' he asked quietly.

'Oh, nothing, nothing,' she stammered in confusion, 'only I didn't think the darling was quite the thing.'

'You never said a word about it to me?'

'No, of course not; the dog might have died and you would never have noticed it,' recovering her composure as well as her combative instinct.

'As if I weren't desperately interested in anything that concerned you! I will have a look at

the little brute to-night, and if he isn't well we'll send for the vet to-morrow.'

'Captain Mayhew says he is as good as a vet, and we shouldn't have to pay him anything,' she said, very quietly.

'I never knew you think of expense before,' not at all pleased by this peculiar style of economy.

'I am profiting by your lessons,' pursing up her lips.

'You talk as if I were a screw.'

'*You* talked as if we were paupers,' with an indignant flash from her eyes.

'Just because I wouldn't go to Monte Carlo?'

'Yes—and that was horrid of you. Don't you know that I'm moped to death; and you grudge me the only two people who will take the trouble to come over?' trembling with excitement, and almost frightened at her own words.

'So you ask a fool and a puppy to console you?' his upper lip curling scornfully.

'They are better than nothing,' sullenly.

'Do you call me "nothing?"' very quietly.

'No, but you can't talk of anything but books and politics, and I hate them both.'

'Good gracious, child, do you know what you are saying? If I bore you already, after only two months of it, what is to become of us both?' he asked tragically.

She gave her shoulders an insolent shrug.

'You will have your books, and your shooting, hunting, everything you want, and I—'

'Yes—you?' he interposed eagerly, as she paused. 'Do you think I'm such a selfish brute that I could be happy if you weren't?'

'I'm sure you could,' she said coldly, 'so I shall look out for myself.'

‘Perdita!’

Not another word passed between them as they turned in at the gate of The Thickets, and the chestnuts brought them up to the front door in splendid style.

Paul handed out his wife, but as she turned into the drawing-room with an exclamation of delight at the fire which had been lighted by her husband’s orders, he went into the library, and closed the heavy door behind him, with something like a groan.

‘Was it his fault?’ he asked himself, over and over again, as he paced up and down the darkening room; and, subjecting his conduct to a searching analysis, he came to the conclusion that it was. He had never given her much choice as to whether she would have him or no. He had wanted her so madly that he had constrained her to come to him by the power of his will, and—good heavens!—was it true that he ‘wanted’ her no longer?

The room seemed to stifle him, and, walking to the window, he threw it open and raised his face to the chill east wind and the darkened sky. He watched the branches of the larches tossing up and down with every gust, and frowned with pain as he remembered that, just in the same way, only a short time ago, he had been tossed here and there on the wild winds of a passion, a mere shuttlecock in the hands of his feelings. It was a despicable thing for a man who prided himself on the power of his intellect and his strength of will to find that he had no more real power of resistance to his passions than the merest sensualist. He had loved Perdita Verschoyle for the sake of her beauty. Her cheeks were just as softly-rounded, her eyes were just as deeply, darkly blue, but her

loveliness had already lost the power to satisfy him. He had taken her into his heart without first finding out if she were suited to the position, and it was like placing a statue of Venus in a cathedral. Every day, with a cruel clear-sightedness, he found out points of dissimilarity between them. Mentally weighing her small personality in the balance, 'Found wanting' was the constant sentence, and the discovery only afforded him a fresh sense of defeat every time.

It seemed to him that he had studied everything in nature except 'Woman,' and yet it was a more important subject than any other, for a woman could make or mar his life, whilst any of the neglected ologies would only have left one blank space in his mind.

But idle regrets were of no possible use. She was his property, to be looked after and taken care of in a higher degree than corn-fields, or pasture lands, or the inmates of his stables and kennels. He could not get rid of her except by some violent disruption; he must keep her by his side, to see that no temptation reached her. He had promised before men to cherish her, and he would never break that promise, though no extra binding force had been lent to it by religion. Under these circumstances, he knew that he must do the best he could, and make her life as bearable to her as possible. 'But what will be the end of it?' he asked, with a groan, as the level stretch of constant, futile endeavour seemed to unfold itself before his despairing eyes, and the sunshine which might have gilded it was hidden behind the gloomy clouds of disappointment.

Disappointment is an unpleasant word in itself, when associated with a child's tear-stained cheeks, and a party deferred to another day, or lost through a shower of rain; but it becomes almost unbearable in its wretchedness when it applies to a life-time, and its consequences spread from youth to old age.

The dressing-bell roused Paul from his abstraction, and, cold at heart as well as chilled to the bone, he shut the window, and groped his way through the unlighted room to the door. It was a shock to him to find Perdita just the same as usual, as if she were not aware of the rocks on which they both were stranded. She looked particularly well in a pale blue tea-gown, and she was standing before a tall mirror, draped with Algerian curtains, when Paul came into the drawing-room, looking as solemn as a hired mute.

'Why, Paul, you look as if you were attending your own funeral!' she cried out, as soon as she saw him. 'Come here and admire me. There's nobody else, or I would save you the trouble.'

He looked down at her with grave eyes, and then, with a sudden pang of pity, drew her to him, and kissed her on the full, red lips.

'Don't,' she said pettishly. 'You'll ruin my dress before any one else has seen it.'

His face hardened.

'Come, or the soup will be cold,' he said shortly, as he held out his arm.

'You might at least have said that you liked my dress,' and she pouted like an offended child.

'As if you cared a straw whether I did or no,' the colour rushing to his cheeks.

'Why shouldn't I?' raising her pencilled eyebrows; 'you are a man.'

'Yes, but only a husband,' with withering scorn; and then they went into dinner.

The bitterness of his mood passed off, and was succeeded by an interval of comparative indifference. He became engrossed in shooting his partridges, and as he invited some of the best 'guns' in the neighbourhood to join him, and as they often stayed to dinner, Perdita was happier. He disliked her evident appreciation of their admiration, but he told himself that he was a jealous fool, and that flattery was the breath of life to a woman.

Her flirtations became the talk of the neighbourhood, but, of course, he was the last man to hear of them, and, to do Perdita justice, she was only bent on amusing herself. She saw no reason why she should not have a man lounging in her boudoir, and telling her all the empty chit-chat of the neighbourhood, whilst Paul was forgetting a November fog, and all the unpleasantnesses of life, as well as his pretty wife, over a musty volume in the library.

This sort of thing could not go on for long without coming to some sort of crisis. Sir Samuel Morgan took it upon himself to warn Mr Nugent that young Ashton was always hanging about his house. Paul thanked the old squire very coldly, but the next time Mr Ashton presented himself, 'Not at home' was said to him by the butler, who seemed in a hurry to shut the door, and a few days later he heard that the Nugents had gone abroad for three weeks.



## CHAPTER III.

### DISILLUSION.

‘Now look here, Per,’ said Paul, leaning his back against the mantel-shelf in the drawing-room one cold, bleak, January day, when the fireside was the only place for comfort, ‘you’ve only got to say what you want. I’ll give up hunting,’ with an inward groan, ‘if you want me to take you for a walk or a drive, only don’t turn down the corners of your mouth and look like an involuntary martyr.’

‘I am a martyr, and you know it,’ looking into the fire with angry eyes, as she leant her chin on her hand, and her elbows on her knees. ‘I hate the country, and it is brutal of you to make me live here.’

‘You know very well that I can’t help it,’ he said quietly, as a weary look crept over his young, good-looking face. ‘If we shut up this place, and took a decent house in London, I should like to know who would pay the damage. I know I couldn’t.’

‘You could sell it, and then we could take a house in Mayfair on the proceeds.’ She stooped to pick up Bogie, an obese, surly little pug, and buried her face on its broad back, for she scarcely dared to glance at her husband.

'Sell The Thickets!' he exclaimed in amazement, feeling as if the proposition were nothing short of an outrage. 'Do you know that my people have lived here for five centuries?'

'Then I'm sure it's time for you to give it up. Change is the order of the day, and you would be quite a different man if you lived in London.'

'I should prefer penal servitude,' and, though it was folly, he looked as if he meant it.

'Then you are only fit for Bedlam,' she decided, in a tone of equal conviction.

He took no notice of the remark, but leant his elbow on the mantel-shelf and frowned at the fire. Presently he gave a short laugh.

'I wonder what you would think of me if I told you that my only haven of refuge would be the reading-room of the British Museum?'

'I should wish you were a mummy, and could never get out,' throwing Bogie off her lap, and starting up, for she was always spasmodic in her movements. 'Oh, why did I ever come across you,' drawing her brows together angrily. 'I used to be the jolliest girl in London, and now I envy the crossing-sweepers.'

'Perdita,' and he caught her by the shoulder as she was turning away, 'do you tell me to my face that you want to be free?'

'Of course I do,' turning upon him with flashing eyes, as her pent-up discontent broke forth in a wave of bitterness. 'I hate the place—I hate my life—and I hate you.'

For one minute she stood facing him, her bosom heaving, her lips quivering, her hands twitching convulsively, her whole being rising up against

him in sudden wild rebellion. Oh, how proud she felt of having a soul above this quiet, humdrum life, how she despised those poor benighted creatures who could endure it with phlegmatic content! How she revelled in the consciousness that she was only fitted for a bright and brilliant sphere.

All the colour faded from Paul's face as his grasp relaxed.

'And you are my wife,' he said slowly, as if measuring the immensity of the calamity which had fallen upon him. Their eyes met, hers bright, hard, and defiant, his grave as death with stern reproach.

'Well, don't you believe me?' she asked, with a nervous little laugh.

'Yes, for once in your life, I believe you implicitly,' he said coldly, and then he went out of the room and shut himself up in the library. Such an overpowering rage possessed him that he was terrified at the violence of his own feelings. As he had stood opposite to her in all her beauty, and heard her tell him with such heartless effrontery that she hated him, as he realised in one long minute the utter hopelessness of his position, and knew that there was no remedy, he had felt as if he could seize her by that soft white throat of hers, and throttle her without pity or remorse. This was the girl whom he had fancied so superior to all other girls that he must have her for his own—a creature without a mind or a heart—with no capacity for appreciating the deeper or the higher interests of life, no thought beyond the gowns on her back, and the compliments they could extract from the men of her acquaintance.

She professed herself a churchwoman, and yet religion had no active influence on her empty life. She could be almost brutal in her candour when irritation won the day over prudence, and yet a false excuse or a downright fib came glibly to her tongue whenever she wished to make a good impression. He was a man of most fastidious taste, and her outward appearance had satisfied him completely ; but to his constant disgust, when she was no longer acting a part after careful study, he found that she was absolutely vulgar in thought and feeling, and that her charming refinement was only skin deep. Before her God she had sworn to love him, and now she told him to his face that the vow was broken, without one single blush of shame, without one quiver of pain or compunction in her triumphant voice. As he paced up and down the room, he smiled scornfully at the thought of that one religious ceremony in which he had been forced to take a part. The white-robed priest had made no impression upon him, nor the altar before which so many of the congregation reverently bowed their heads, but as a man of honour he considered himself morally bound by the promise he then made, and he had intended to be true to it as long as life lasted. Perdita had looked so sweetly devout, as she repeated the words 'to love and obey,' as if she had thought the angels were watching her, and that heaven's blessing was falling on her golden head ; and yet that promise was broken as lightly as if she considered the whole ceremony a sham or a farce.

What would be the end of it ? he asked, with a dreary sigh, but in his darkest hour of conscious

defeat he never guessed the awful answer. He thought it was inevitable that they should drift further and further apart, living under the same roof with a cold neutrality existing between them ; and he knew that, much as he loved his books, or a capital gallop across country on his favourite hunter, none of these things would make up to him for the shadow on his home. But there should be no scandal—nothing to make the world jeer or bring a stain on the proud old name. They would both live their sinless lives without crying out for the sympathy of their neighbours, or giving occasion for gossiping tongues to wag ; and perhaps they would grow accustomed to it all, and wonder why they had ever been sentimental enough to wish for anything more.

‘There is no remedy,’ he said to himself ; ‘therefore, of course, I must live it down. Perdita shall have nothing to complain of.’ But his youth cried out within him, and the cold philosophy of his resignation seemed more fitted for passionless old age.

Paul determined to do his duty by his wife, and after a few days proposed that she should take to following the hounds.

‘Do you want to kill me?’ she asked ungraciously ; but she was pleased with the idea of hunting, and kindly allowed him to buy her a horse. She was still more pleased when she found Mayhew at the meet, and he politely offered to give her a lead. Perdita had been accustomed to ride in the Row, but she had never faced such a thing as a five-barred gate or a bullfinch, so she clung to the roads with unabashed persistency. Captain Mayhew was one of those men who are

ready to flirt with a pretty woman at all times and all seasons, but to give up a run for her sake was beyond him. Cunningly he persuaded her to try this or that, gradually rousing her vanity into eager rivalry with the other ladies of the neighbourhood, till she put her eager horse at a very low fence, gave him his head, shut her eyes, and hoped for the best. She flew out of the saddle like a bird from a branch, and alighted on a mud-heap; and when Paul came up with a white face to ask if she were hurt, she raised her golden head from close proximity to Mayhew's shoulder, and said, with a sarcastic smile,—

‘Sorry to disappoint you, but I’m not dead yet.’

Paul dug his spurs savagely into his chestnut's flanks, and dashed off after the hounds, inwardly vowing that he would never let anxiety for his wife interfere with a run again. But he did, and the knowledge that she was probably floundering in the mud a few fields off took away half of his enjoyment. When he offered to give her a lead, she said,—

‘No, thank you, I don't want to break all my bones.’

And as she generally made these acrid speeches in a particularly distinct voice, before a large audience, many people began to look askance at Paul, fearing that he bullied his pretty wife.

The weather changed, and became so rainy that Perdita was forced to give up hunting, and, for want of anything better to do, she struck up a friendship with Miss Goodwin, the sister of the parish doctor. Julia Goodwin was a spinster of thirty-two, and for several years had fed her sentimentality on an imaginary passion for the good-

looking owner of The Thickets. To meet him riding through the village was the hope of each day, and the news of his marriage, she thought, would be her death-blow. She managed to survive it, however, and, strange to say, transferred, or seemed to transfer, her affections from Paul to Paul's wife. Perdita ridiculed her antiquated dress, the shiny black ringlets on her lemon-coloured forehead, the simper which seemed to be a part of her company manners; but the one thing she did not laugh at was the stream of flattery which poured from Miss Goodwin's lips whenever they met, and which was soft as cold cream to Perdita's irritated feelings. She began to regard Miss Goodwin as a useful and sympathetic confidante, and listened with approval as the spinster rhapsodised about 'Woman's Rights,' which was a favourite theme with her, though she would have acknowledged 'Man's Rights' with the greatest eagerness, if she could have found any male mad enough to propose to her. Her influence was a lowering one, and Perdita's grievances always seemed to increase after a chat in the would-be-æsthetic drawing-room of the White House.

'Men were brutes' according to Miss Goodwin; who would trample any woman under foot, if she did not get on their backs and ride them.

Perdita remembered this when Paul remonstrated gravely, but very gently, about her flirtations. She flew out at him, and told him fiercely to mind his own business, adding that she should certainly do as she pleased, without consulting a godless atheist.

'You are a delightful example of Christianity,' he said with a bitter smile. 'Alter your whole

course of life, or you will never make me a proselyte.'

'Thanks, I'm not a parson,' tossing her head in scorn, as if she thought the clerical profession far beneath her own position; 'go and hear Mr Whittaker preach—he might convert you.'

'I'd be very much obliged to him if he could convert *you*.'

'What do you mean?' opening her blue eyes to their widest extent. 'I'm a Christian already.'

'Then defend me from being another,' he said with energy, as he thought of his own elevated standard of morality, and compared it with the little pennon dragged in the dust by his Christian wife.



## CHAPTER IV

### A CATASTROPHE.

'I MUST go in, indeed I must. He will be as savage as a bear already.'

'Poor little thing, it's very rough on you,' in a masculine voice. 'I'll drop in to-morrow, to see if you are in pieces. Ta-ta!'

These few sentences caught Paul's ear as he crossed the hall, and went into the library. Lady Morgan had been worrying him that very afternoon about his wife, and he had loyally denied all the accusations which had been brought against her; but his pride revolted at the consciousness that Mrs Paul Nugent had conducted herself with so little womanly dignity, that she had become the favourite topic of conversation amongst all the dowagers of the neighbourhood.

The hall door shut, and in the dead silence he could hear the sound of cautious footsteps going towards the dining-room. Then a fierce contempt flashed from his eyes, and he clenched his hands tightly as if he would have gladly knocked some one down with a blow from the shoulder. For one minute the pugilistic instinct was strong within him, and he longed for this despicable woman to be a man, that he might deal with her

as she deserved. For a long time he had noticed a strange incoherency in her manner, but he had attributed it to any cause but the right one. Of course he had heard of sad cases of feminine excess, even amongst the *crème de la crème*, but it had never seemed possible that his wife could fall into it—a woman without an anxiety or a trouble, who was in want of no Lethe in which to drown her cares. He listened, though he hated himself for the mere suspicion, and all the doors being open, heard the chink of a decanter, held by an unsteady hand, against the brim of a wine-glass. A pause, and then it came again and again. Was she so afraid of him that she must fortify herself in some manner before she could face an interview? Impossible! for of late a fatal callousness had possessed him, and he had let her go her own frivolous way unchecked. No, there was no excuse for her. It was as if she had set before her the fiendish purpose of torturing her husband in every way she could possibly imagine.

Although he had restrained himself with a marvellous patience, she did not scruple to talk of him to her admirers ‘as a savage bear.’ Though he had left her free as air, only driven to gentle remonstrance when her conduct was even in worse taste than usual, he knew that he was spoken of constantly as a bully. And now, if she took to drinking out of sheer perversity, the sin and the shame would be laid at his door! As to that, he cared less than most men, but he bent his head down on the mantel shelf in the bitterness of his spirit, as he shuddered at the thought of his whole future life becoming one long, tortured

nightmare. No, no! it shouldn't be. He would watch her night and day; he would never leave her alone; he would speak to her gently but strongly; he would represent to her that even those friends who seemed to delight in her society now, would cast her off in disgust; he would promise to take her up to town for the season; he would let The Thickets for the whole summer, and banish himself from it in its time of greatest beauty. He would do any mortal thing she liked, or leave undone anything she disliked, if she would *only* give it up. As he was planning with the determined hopefulness of youth, he heard the rustle of her dress, and, with a strong feeling of repulsion, raised his head, and turned round to greet her.

'You are very late, Perdita, he said hoarsely, and fixed his eyes upon her swaying figure.

What a lie her whole appearance was—that dainty dress of softest grey, with fur to match, so fitted for a bright, innocent girl; that delicate, refined beauty, and the beautiful lips that were so fatally unsteady.

'Late? Oh dear, no! It's quite early—quite,' talking quickly, with a sort of nervous excitement; 'I've been at the White House. The charming Julia walked home with me.'

'Did the charming Julia say she would come to-morrow to see if you were in pieces?' he asked, with an inflection of scorn in his voice that passed her by unhurt.

She looked puzzled as she drew her long grey gloves through her small hands.

'I don't remember.' Then she came close to him, and peered up into his face with the puzzled

look still in her eyes. Hesitatingly, she laid her hand upon his coat sleeve. 'Why are you angry with me, dear? Julia walked home with me—I vow she did, and no one else.'

He had borne it all so far with wonderful self-restraint, but the lie acted as the match to a slumbering fire.

'Don't touch me—don't speak to me!' he cried, with a shudder of disgust, as he shook off her hand. 'I despise you from the bottom of my heart.'

With a little inarticulate cry, she tottered, over-balanced, and fell down in a small heap on the Turkey carpet, hitting her head against the marble coping of the fireplace, as he found out later.

'Get up,' he said hastily, 'get up for goodness sake, before the servants come.'

And then he bent over her, and tried to see her face, but the room was never very light, and down there on the floor, at half-past seven, it was almost dark. Suddenly the rage died out of his heart, and a cold chill crept over him, and a fear of he knew not what. He stretched out his hand from where he was kneeling, and rang a peal. It was answered at once by Marston the butler, who looked round the room in perplexity and saw no one.

'Bring lights at once, your mistress has had a fall,' came from out of the twilight in his master's voice.

Lights were brought. Paul never forgot the scene that followed. The deathly stillness settling down on the pretty, girlish features—the small hands still clasping the gloves they would never wear again—the delicate limbs, so full of life and

activity but half an hour before, stiffening into an attitude of forced repose—repose that never would be broken. Was it a ghastly dream, or reality, worse than anything his imagination had ever figured? The servants stood round with scared faces and smothered ejaculations of horror. Christine, the maid, proffered a salts bottle, as if salts had power to recall a soul that had spread its wings and departed. Marston sent a groom for Dr Goodwin ; but Paul knelt there as if petrified into stone, with the golden head and the cold dead face on his knee. She was gone where neither reproach nor entreaty could follow her. Alone and unaided, she had faced the mystery of death, and if there were a world beyond she knew it now. After an interval—he never knew whether it was short or long—the doctor arrived. The groom had met him on the high road driving with his sister, and, horrified at the news of Mrs Nugent's death, he had come straight to the house without any delay.

The servants stole from the room as Marston silently ushered in the doctor, while Julia Goodwin peered in at the door with an ashen face. She was not stunned like the wretched husband, but her restless brain was already busy in seeking some cause for the catastrophe which had robbed her of her friend. Only an hour ago full of life and frivolity, her chief topic of conversation the new dress she was going to order for the ball at the close of the hunting-season, and now—dead! How had it come about? What had happened? Had there been a quarrel? Had she fallen downstairs? Had Mr Nugent heard anything about the walk home with Captain Mayhew? All these questions and surmises fluttered through

her mind as they drove up to the silent house, and came back in full force as she stood furtively watching and listening, her limbs quivering, her breath panting, her whole being shaking and shivering, by the library door.

Then suddenly, through the stillness, rang out Paul's voice—wild with a bitter agony—as he cried: 'I've killed her! I've killed her!'

Miss Goodwin shrank back, but her eyes flashed strangely. Though she did not know it, it was what she had been waiting for. This put the climax to the horror, and, groping her way to a chair in the hall, she sat down to collect her thoughts. She had lost her friend; that was a grief which she would have plenty of time to think over and digest—plenty of time when one dull day would come after the other without bringing the excitement of a visit from Mrs Nugent. But as to this other horror—it was so immense and so appalling, it seemed to fill her mind and leave no space for anything else. Paul Nugent, the man who had despised her, was a murderer! He, who had held his head so high that he had scarcely seemed to see her as he passed, had sunk to the deepest depths. He was lower than she was—immeasurably lower. His pride and over-fastidiousness had brought him to this—a lower level than that of a crossing-sweeper with shoeless feet and uncombed hair!

She did not hear her brother's shocked remonstrance, and, to do her justice, she did not know that Paul's self-accusation was a morbid exaggeration of the actual circumstance; but down in the depths of her heart she felt sure that Dr Goodwin would somehow explain all the horror

away, and find a plausible excuse for this sudden death which would save Mr Nugent's neck, and rob the neighbourhood of a tragic sensation.

And Julia Goodwin was right. There was no fuss at the inquest, for Dr Goodwin made the most of the fact that he had been attending Mrs Nugent for some trifling ailment, and declared that an inquiry was unnecessary. He wrote a certificate without the smallest qualm of conscience, for he was certain that no provocation under the sun could induce Paul Nugent to forget that he was a gentleman, and lift his hand against a woman. He received a true account of the accident when Paul was in a less excited condition, and he believed it implicitly. So the unfortunate Perdita was laid to rest in the churchyard, with no tragic story attached to her name, and those who had scorned her in every-day life sent their carriages to follow her poor corpse to its last resting-place, thereby throwing a decent veil over the past, and showing respect for the widower.

It was all over, and Paul had escaped from would-be sympathisers with a hurried shake of the hand, or a grave nod. He had a horror of the house, for he could not stay in the library without going over every detail of that dreadful scene; he could not pass through the hall without seeing that small coffin which had lain in state—a mound of white flowers—on the large mahogany table in the centre.

He paced up and down a terrace walk, with a view on one side, over wide spreading pasture lands and stately elms, to the statelier hills beyond; and on the other, a shelving bank led down to the smooth tennis-lawn, and the comfortable pic-

turesque house, surrounded by bright spring annuals in the flower-beds.

Paul's life was in his own hands to do what he liked with. He was perfectly free, but the liberty he had sighed for brought no sense of pleasure. A feeling of utter desolation was upon him. That year and a half of married life seemed to have alienated him from all his friends, and he had never felt more alone than when standing by his wife's grave, surrounded by the kindly country squires, who had gathered round him in his trouble. He scarcely listened to the beautiful words of St Paul, which could bring no comfort to his empty heart. Poor, faulty, frivolous Perdita was gone for ever; sown indeed in corruption, but never to be raised in glory. She had played her part, and played it amiss, but it was all over now. Perhaps his rigid face expressed his want of sympathy with his surroundings, for he caught the Rev. Amos Whittaker's eyes fixed upon him in grave rebuke. All these men believed in a resurrection of the dead, and that made a gulf between him and them. Strange that they should not keep their lives a little straighter, if they thought they had to take them up again on the other side of the grave.

He was idly speculating on their unconscious inconsistency when a turn in the path brought him face to face with the Vicar. Mr Whittaker was tall and broad-shouldered, with a grey beard, which effectually concealed his white tie, a pleasant face, with snub features, and large, rather vacuous blue eyes. He was evidently suffering from nervousness as he planted himself before Paul, with his hands resting on the silver knob of his walking-



stick. He felt like a prophet with a message to deliver, but Paul did not look like a promising recipient.

‘Mr Nugent, I don’t often trouble you,’ he began hurriedly, ‘but the time has come when longer silence would be criminal.’

Paul bowed, with an air of polite sufferance, but said nothing.

‘The hand of God is upon you, Mr Nugent. You have had one terrible warning. A young and lovely woman—’

‘I won’t discuss my wife with any man,’ he interposed hurriedly; ‘bar that, I’ll be offended at nothing.’

Mr Whittaker flushed.

‘That is callousness, not patience. You open your ears, and you shut your heart; but it won’t be for ever, sir. There will come a time,’ raising his right hand, and speaking with energy, ‘when you will cry, and God will not answer, when you will knock, and the door won’t open; a time when the terrors of death will be upon you, and you will know the tortures of the damned. Wait till then, and you are lost.’

‘I’m afraid I must wait till I die, for nobody has ever come back to tell me; but I refuse to consider myself damned without some proof,’ he said gravely.

“Whosoever denieth Me before men, him will I also deny before My Father which is in heaven,” said the Vicar solemnly. ‘Those are the words of our blessed Lord, and as sure as you stand there, in the pride of your intellect, which you have made your God, in that day when penitent sinners are accepted—and there is forgiveness for so

many—you will be rejected with the vilest of the human race, and see hell-fire.'

'You are very candid, but you don't frighten me. Tell me of something terrible that will happen to me in this life,' Paul said, with a weary smile, 'and I'll get out of it as quickly as I can.'

'Oh, blind! blind! blind!' exclaimed the Vicar, striking the path with his stick. 'You would give up this life, with all the luxuries you've gathered round you, and face another for which you had made no preparation whatever? What would you think of a man who threw up a house in Belgravia, and a princely fortune, and started for Australia as a pauper?'

'I should imagine that he considered work, and not idleness, as a penance for the ills of life.'

'But he might get no work, or he might starve before he got into harbour.'

'True; but I should never give up a reality for an idea.'

'You are mistaken, Mr Nugent, you do. You expend yourself on the shams and fleeting shows of this world, and neglect the lasting realities of the next.'

'Prove them to be realities, then the whole question's solved,' very quietly.

'It has been proved again and again; but I wish you good-evening,' hurriedly raising his hat. 'I came in all charity, and I don't wish to say anything harsh this day, but the old Adam is strong within me. I shall come again, and drive the nail home, for God's hand *is* upon you, and you *must* repent, or be damned.'

Mr Whittaker walked away in a hurry, hoping that he had done some good, feeling sure, at least, that he had done no harm, and turning over in his

mind some telling arguments for the next meeting, which were to break down the barriers of scepticism with an overwhelming flood, and pour in the waters of the Gospel. But, unhappily, there was to be no next time.

That very evening Paul Nugent started for town, and turned his back on The Thickets for ever. The new life was to begin in a new place ; but he was forced to take his old self away with him, and, in spite of the Vicar's threats of eternal damnation, he was no nearer Christianity than he was before Perdita's death.

END OF PROLOGUE.

## CHAPTER I.

### 'THE ORTHODOX VILLAGE OF ELMSFIELD.'

ELMSFIELD prided itself on being the prettiest village in England, and the pride was founded on something better than self-deception, for the old-fashioned cottages were nearly smothered in a wealth of creepers, and the small grey church, with its weather-beaten tower, was set like a jewel framed in varied foliage at the foot of a wooded hill.

A very pretty girl, with a piquante face and a small, well-rounded figure, tilted her sailor hat a little lower over her blue eyes, and watched with a smile for somebody who was sure to come. Evensong was just over, and she distributed smiles and nods with lavish bounty on all the various members of the departing congregation. The two Miss Singletons, elderly spinsters whose name afforded opportunities for juvenile puns, remarked with great originality that it was a fine day, and then ambled off to Ivy Cottage, a small abode just outside the low, grey wall of the churchyard, where they lived on about twopence halfpenny a year in abundant content.

Here he is at last—a man below the average height, but with an air of distinction that made

him seem taller, with a pleasant, kindly, good-looking face, and a pair of honest blue eyes very prone to twinkle with mundane fun, in spite of the severely clerical cut of his garments.

‘Where is Mr Lovel?’ inquired Miss Nellie Dashwood, in order to make it seem that she had been waiting for the absent one who was not there.

‘Lovel? Oh, he’s about somewhere,’ rather disappointedly. ‘Did you want him, Miss Dashwood?’

‘I did, and I do. You must get hold of him somehow, Mr Conway. Tea and tennis are waiting for you both, and we are in a hurry to begin.’

‘Lovel shall be produced, but I won’t wait for him. I’ll get into my flannels and be with you like a shot.’

Miss Dashwood gave a nod of approval, and, jumping into a pony-cart which was waiting for her, drove off at a breathless pace. The Rev. Charles Conway, junior curate of St John’s, hurried away to the red-brick house with a rustic porch, and many eccentricities of architecture, in which he and his *fidus achates* and fellow-curate, the Rev. Herbert Lovel, had taken up their abode. It was called Elmsfield Lodge, and was on the left-hand side of the church, whilst the Miss Singleton’s bower of bliss was on the right. The spinsters had a fine view of all that went on in the road, because their garden followed its outward curve, and from its extremity they could watch every visitor that called at the Lodge, and every *tête-à-tête* held under the lilacs.

They made no mischief, but they spun the most

charming romances out of the scantiest materials, and in the privacy of their tiny drawing-room discussed eventualities with the eagerness of a pair of sporting-men over their betting-books. Beechwood Hall was the centre of interest, and the two Miss Dashwoods its culminating point. If the Miss Singletons had followed their fancies, they would have been seated under the gigantic cedar-tree which sheltered one side of the Squire’s lawn, and joined in the conversation kept up by Maude, her father, and her aunt, whilst Nellie was flirting alternately with Charlie Conway and Captain Fitzgerald, in order to show that she was quite impartial. Captain Fitzgerald, who was unlike the typical guardsman, because he was plain, and his swagger was only put on, and not a part of his being, listened to Miss Nellie Dashwood’s sallies with lazy indulgence, whilst Charlie Conway received them with fervent appreciation.

‘Now mind,’ she remarked, with uplifted finger, as she caught sight of a tall figure in irreproachable flannels advancing from the shrubbery, ‘I am to be the first person to tell him the important news.’

‘Lovel won’t raise a hair about it,’ remarked the guardsman languidly.

‘Not he. He’ll take ten times more interest in a broken-kneed pauper than in a well-to-do baronet. Poverty is his line.’

‘I hope he won’t pursue it in person. Now, watch the effect—it will be a shock. Mr Lovel, so glad to see you,’ holding out her hand and looking up into his grave face with her merry blue eyes. ‘Do you know that the interesting widower is actually coming to The Chase?’

The effect was instantaneous. His courteous smile vanished, and he turned to the Squire with the most sepulchral gravity.

‘Is this true, Mr Dashwood?’

‘Quite true. I’m rather sorry, it puts one in a hole,’ said the Squire, knitting his brows. ‘I must have the fellow here, and be civil to him for his uncle’s sake.’

‘Certainly, certainly,’ put in Aunt Tabitha, who had always an eye to the main chance, for which few people gave her credit. ‘The Chase is a splendid property, and the neighbourhood couldn’t be so unkind to a poor young man as to turn the cold shoulder on him.’

‘No,’ said Nellie meditatively; ‘it would be very unkind, wouldn’t it, to turn a cold shoulder on a “splendid-propertyed” young man.’

‘I bet that you wouldn’t get any neighbourhood to do it,’ remarked Charlie Conway.

‘No, loaves and fishes always weigh in a man’s favour. It’s we poor beggars of soldiers who go to the wall—isn’t it, Nell?’ asked Fitzgerald, who was a third cousin, and exacted all the privileges given by that obscure relationship.

‘Yes; when the peaches are ripe,’ with a flash from her blue eyes.

‘When they grow too high for you to reach them?’ with a fine disregard to her personal allusion.

‘No, sir, when the peaches are there, and I’m not.’

‘Now, Mr Lovel, will you tell me what you think about it?’ Maude Dashwood asked, with an upward glance which might have set any man’s pulses quivering. ‘Am I bound to be civil to a wretch who doesn’t believe in anything but himself?’

Lovel's pale intellectual face grew a shade whiter as he said slowly,—

'He probably believes in some sort of Supreme Being, or "First Cause," as they like to phrase it. But is there any hope of turning him into a Christian, if we don't behave like Christians towards him? That's the point.'

'I was so sure you would have nothing to do with him,' she said almost petulantly. 'I hate the thought of his coming; I should like to make him feel like a pariah and an outcast.'

'If you admit him into Paradise you can't do that.'

'No, of course not,' put in Nellie, who had a marvellous love of expressing her opinion. 'I mean him to give balls and tennis-tournaments, and all sorts of delightful things, and it would be mean to expect anything of him if we did not treat him well.'

'Yes, we'll get as much out of him as we can; but if he tries the friendship dodge, we'll say we don't pal with atheists, we are such orthodox people in Elmsfield,' and Charlie Conway sprang to his feet, and caught up a racquet as if to end the discussion.

'Is that sarcasm?' asked Nellie, as she stretched out her hand for a ball.

'No, but I think it's rather rough on a fellow to pull him to pieces before we know. We've only got public report to go upon.'

'If he comes to church, I'll shake hands; if not, I'll bow, and nothing more.'

'Announce that publicly, and we sha'n't have standing room.'

'You'd have to alter the system, and say "No



admittance except by ticket," put in Fitzgerald, as he raised a tankard of red claret to his blonde moustaches, and emptied it slowly, but with infinite relish.

'You are going to play, Fitz?' inquired Miss Dashwood, in a doubtful tone, which gave him the cue for his answer.

'Thanks, I'm warm enough as I am. Don't ask me to exert myself further.'

'Have a game of bowls,' suggested the Squire, after watching the first set of tennis, which was won by the younger Miss Dashwood and Charlie Conway. The guardsman assented, and they strolled off together to a charming piece of very level grass, as smooth as a billiard-table, round by the left side of the Hall, opposite the library windows.

The Hall was a fine old castellated building, composed of grey stone, which sparkled like granite, with a broad terrace walk in front of it. Leaning on the balustrade, you looked down on the lawn, which was twelve feet below, through a maze of creeping plants of every kind and variety. Roses, magnolias, jessamines, vied with each other in scenting the air, and a ribbon border of red geraniums, contrasted with dark colises, edged the grass with a band of brilliant colour. The lawn was only divided from the park by a ha-ha, so there was an uninterrupted view over fern-clad slopes, studded here and there with magnificent timber, beyond which rose the Surrey hills in all their wealth of beauty.

The house was sheltered by planes and beeches on either side, and at the back by its own particular hill, called 'The Mount,' which was clothed in verdure all the year round, and in the spring was

radiant with clumps of rhododendron. There the nightingale sang its song of peace day and night; and thither Nellie used to take her troubles, and, being of a passionate, unrestrained nature, sobbed out her rages with her pretty face buried in the soft green mosses, her small hands clutching at the roots of primroses or wild grasses with unconscious vindictive energy, all the joys of life forgotten in the trifling sorrow of the moment.

She was Maude Dashwood's first cousin by birth, but sister by adoption and love, the Squire's pet plaything and sworn ally, Miss Tabitha Wyngate's secret object of jealousy. In all that household of kindly people, that home of comfort, love, and tenderest consideration, Miss Wyngate, the sister of Maude's dead mother, was the only person who tried to impress upon Nellie that she was an orphan and an intruder, who ought to stand on a very different level to the heiress of Beechwood. She did this in an underhand manner, always taking her opportunity for an unpleasant speech when Maude was out of the room. If Maude had ever guessed the truth, Miss Wyngate's stay at the Hall would have come to an abrupt conclusion; but Nellie always put herself in the wrong by flying into a rage, and Miss Dashwood could only regret with a sigh that dear old Nell and Aunt Tabby couldn't hit it off better.

Nellie had a small fortune of her own, and, therefore, could be independent of her relations, but the Squire, in the goodness of his heart, thought this fortune so small that it had better be left to accumulate, and insisted upon treating her like a daughter. The allowance did not come out of Miss Wyngate's pocket, and yet she regarded it

as a grievance, and made it a basis of frequent quarrels. She wore out her temper with continual attempts to make Nellie 'keep her place,' which was difficult, as 'the place' she had in her mind was that of a humble dependent, and nothing would have induced the girl to occupy it. She looked up to her cousin with the most enthusiastic admiration, and thought her a miracle of loveliness and excellence, but she in no wise considered her as her social superior, and saw no reason why she should walk meekly through life as if possessed of nothing, not even of her own opinion.

This very afternoon she had the audacity to win every set, and Miss Wyngate congratulated her on her success with a scarcely veiled expression of wonder.

'There's nothing to be proud of,' said Maude, with her sweet smile. 'I played disgracefully, and Mr Lovel was too evidently thinking of something else.'

## CHAPTER II.

### A NEW LIFE IN A NEW HOME.

PERDITA had scandalised her husband by suggesting that The Thickets should be sold ; but after her death the place became so distasteful to him that he put it into an agent's hands, and let it to a retired corn-merchant, who thought, if he settled on another man's acres, he might learn in time to play the part of a country gentleman. Disgusted with life in general, and himself in particular, his mind too disturbed for the enjoyment of quiet study, too miserable to wish for the society of acquaintances or even friends, Paul started on his travels. He was so anxious to get out of England that he scarcely waited to consider where he was going ; and his movements were so uncertain, that a black-edged letter followed him for several weeks without falling into his hands. When he opened it at last, he found to his surprise that his eccentric uncle Sir Thomas Nugent, who had forgotten him persistently during his life, had remembered him most satisfactorily just before his death. The baronetcy came to Paul as a matter of course, as well as The Chase, with all the many acres attached to it : but he had never expected that Sir Thomas

would leave him the large fortune which he had amassed during the last years of his miserly existence. Instead of being left to found a second college, after the pattern of Keble, at Oxford, as he had supposed to be probable, or to endow a home for inebriates, as he had known to be possible, it was all bequeathed to the nephew whom the old man would not receive within his doors on account of his unorthodox opinions. The will was a flat contradiction of all Sir Thomas's avowed intentions, and was only weighted with the one condition—that the new owner should take up his abode at The Chase at once, and make it his usual place of residence. Paul puzzled over it, and failed entirely to understand his uncle's motive. It seemed so paradoxical to mistrust a man, to suspect him of a fiendish capacity for evil, and a commensurate incapacity for good, to regard him as beyond the pale of ordinary humanity, to treat him as the veriest scum of the earth, and yet to load him with a vast fortune to be spent well or ill according to his wicked will. There was only one man in the world who could have understood the working of the dead man's mind, or guessed why the new owner was not left with a fine property on his hands, and too small a rental to keep it in proper condition. This was Dr Abbott, the Rector of Elmsfield, who was generally occupied in taking care of his health in the most delightful places on the Continent, whilst his parochial work was done for him by the united efforts of his two curates. He was the friend to whom Sir Thomas confided the desire of his life, and he had shaken his head over it as

convincingly as he could, but to no purpose, for the baronet, having once made up his mind, was as firmly seated on his resolution as The Chase on its solid foundations. Dr Abbott aired his pet projects only to have them all derided in turn, and then he resigned himself and went away. He had always this plan of action open to him; and when anything disagreeable happened in the parish, the rector started off in the next train, leaving his blessing behind him for the benefit of his flock.

It was two years after his wife's death when his uncle died, and Paul found himself a baronet, with a deer-park and a trout-stream, a magnificent house and a well-stored library, the finest shooting in Blankshire, and a fortune that many a prince might have envied—even after a grant from the Commons. And yet he found something to grumble at. He did not object to changing his home, because his unhappy wife had lived in it, and made it hateful to him; but he hated returning to England, and settling down once more to the life of a country squire. The quiet, placid existence had lost its charm ever since the mental earthquake caused by his wife's sudden death. He felt himself braced for struggle, in a mood for any sort of excitement, and by the adverse force of circumstances he was condemned to lead a bucolic life, in the midst of tranquil, idyllic surroundings.

The library at The Chase was a magnificent room, whose walls were literally clothed in the best literature of the past as well as the present. It was a feast for a scholarly eye, a paradise for a student, a haven of delight for the bibliophile.

There was a Polyglot Bible in seven tongues, brought out by Plantin, the great Catholic printer, dated 1555; a Pliny of Elzevir's, his great Protestant rival of the following century, which would have made any collector's mouth water; an Aldine, with which there were few to compare in England. There were examples of every type from the 'brevier,' or 'philosophic' (in plainer parlance, the 'small pica'), to the 'paragon' or 'perfect pattern,' and the well-ordered exuberance of the 'pearl' or 'fancy letter;' and down in the darkest corner were yellow-backed novels by Georges Sand and Balzac which had only cost the purchaser a couple of francs, but had probably brought him many hours of pleasure. There were labels at the top of every compartment of the book-cases; and under the head of theology, Paul smiled to see the works of Newman, Manning, Pusey and Keble, as he remembered the hot interest which his uncle was said to have taken in the Tractarian movement, when an enthusiastic undergraduate at Christchurch. He was dead, and all his enthusiasms had died with him, for his successor looked coldly at the books which had no message for *him*. It seemed to him so strange that men could agonise and break their hearts over a few details of creed, which each man could believe or disbelieve at his pleasure, without making himself amenable to the laws of his country. Why could they not live and let live? he asked, with the broad tolerance of indifference. The world was wide enough for every shade of doctrine. There were the realities of life to fight about, why make a scrimmage about an idea?

His uncle, on the other hand, had thrown himself heart and soul into the struggle for the best traditions of his Church, turning upon all who opposed him with a fierce contempt and hatred; for any one who could not repeat his Shibboleth was to him 'Anathema Marenatha.' He never had the smallest tolerance for those who disagreed with him either in politics or theology, and he was so intensely bigoted, that it was with the greatest difficulty that he could be persuaded to invite either a Low Churchman or a Radical to dinner. Still, with all his one-sidedness, there was something to admire in a man who was ready to live and die for his convictions; for in these days there is a fatal spirit abroad which some men call charity, and others indifference, which takes the backbone out of life, and makes all the muscles numb and inert. The Baronet considered that if a faith weren't worth fighting for, that faith was already dead, and he was not far wrong; for to cry 'peace' when there is no peace is the traitor's part, and betrays some hidden rottenness at the core.

Sir Thomas had no ascetic proclivities. He liked to have a thick pile carpet under his feet, a lofty ceiling over his head, with rafters of Spanish oak most exquisitely carved by a cunning master in the art; to keep the draughts out by stamped velvet curtains, which draped the recesses in the five tall windows, and shrouded the doors; to pursue his studies, whether light or heavy, in the depths of a comfortable chair, which might have figured in the studio of the luxurious Titian; and to shelter himself from intrusion behind a screen, which had probably been pillaged



from an Indian palace. He was not the sort of man to enjoy the exquisite diamond type of an Elzevir by the light of a farthing dip in a carpetless attic, for his books were only an adjunct to his life, and not his whole existence. But he had made this room his hobby, and lavished any amount of money on it with a taste that was surprising in an Englishman of forty years ago. His miserly ways did not come upon him till the fire of his intellect had waned, and the limits of his interests had shrunk to his newspaper, dinner, bottle of old port, and his favourite arm-chair.

Paul admired the stately hall, with the marble columns and the great wide staircase copied from Versailles, the endless drawing-rooms, with their white walls pannelled in gold, and gold-coloured draperies, sofas and chairs; the large dining-room, where the whole county might have been feasted; the gallery, where blue china was well set off against a crimson background; the billiard-room, where every accessory was in its highest perfection; the picture gallery, with its 'old masters' placed in pleasant rivalry side by side with the 'new,' and the Nugents of past generations looking down with smile or frown, according to the fancy of the artist, on their degenerate descendant; but the room he liked best was the library, with all his old favourites against the walls, a lovely view of a pine-clad hill from the windows, and the cosiest of nooks in one especial corner where he could sit, 'the world forgetting, by the world forgot.'

The world had not forgotten him just yet, however, for Seton the butler came in with Mr

Dashwood's card, and the card was promptly followed by the Squire himself.

At the first grasp of that kindly hand, Paul felt no longer friendless. There had been no demonstrations on his arrival, because no one knew the exact day he was likely to come, and he had, consequently, taken possession of his new property without one triumphal arch, or one cheer from the throats of his tenants. Therefore he had made up his mind that he was not welcome to anybody; and that Elmsfield had determined to turn its orthodox back upon him. Mr Dashwood's call showed that he was mistaken, and he was glad of it, for, to live in a place where no one cared to know him would have been insupportable to a man of his sociable disposition.

## CHAPTER III.

### A FIRST INTRODUCTION.

‘WHAT an utter fool I was not to bring an umbrella!’ exclaimed the younger Miss Dashwood, gathering her pink skirts closely round her slight figure, and gazing up at the pattering rain-drops and the pitiless sky with an expression that ought to have softened the heart of the clerk of the weather, if he had been like a clerk of anything else. ‘I’m dying of thirst, and the tea will soon be ready, and Maude won’t know what has become of me, and, of course, Mr Conway won’t come this way just because I want him.’

This was hard on Charlie Conway, because he would have done many things for most people, and he certainly would have done almost anything for Nellie Dashwood; but at that moment he was hard at work in his private den preparing a lecture for the next Friday evening, and had no thoughts to spare for the poor little girl standing under an emaciated thorn in Willow Lane.

Down came the rain as if it never meant to stop, and pools began to form in every hollow of the road. Soon her little oasis would be invaded, and she saw no means of obtaining drier

footing on the bank, as it was defended by an uncompromising hedge of prickles. She heard the scream of the engine as the 4.50 train from Victoria steamed into the little station behind the hill, and looked with reviving hope up the lane. Even vulgar Farmer Gedge, with his florid face and tawdry whiskers, would be dearly welcome, for the most unsightly objects have an intrinsic value as soon as they can serve a useful purpose; and it would be a decidedly useful purpose to relieve a young lady from such an unpleasant position. The dogcart flashed by with umbrellas held so low that poor Nellie was not seen at all, and the little appealing cry she ventured on was lost in the rattle of the wheels and the splashing of the rain. She was just beginning to feel strung up to the worst, and ready to make a desperate rush homewards, when a man came round the corner whom she recognised at once as the new owner of The Chase. He had evidently just come down from town, for he was in a frock coat and tall hat; and he looked a very fair example of an English gentleman, with his tall, upright figure, and his good-looking face, though Nellie was sorry to have to admire him. She had never been introduced to him, so she turned her shoulder towards him, and tried to look as if she were blind enough not to see him; but she heard his steps coming nearer, and when they came to an abrupt stop, a sudden shyness kept her eyes down, and sent a rich wave of colour up into her cheeks.

‘Will you allow me to offer you my umbrella?’ Paul asked, with his usual directness, and an air of the greatest deference.

Nellie was struck by his magnanimity, as she thought of his best hat. The most orthodox man in Elmsfield could have gone no further than this! With a quick revulsion of feeling, she looked up at him with a smile.

‘But you haven’t another!’

‘No,’ with an answering smile; ‘I never carry two. But that doesn’t matter in the least,’ hastily. ‘Please take it!’ trying to put the ponderous handle into her small hand.

She drew back.

‘I couldn’t, really.’

A cloud came over his face, and his back stiffened. Even a child in the rain would not take an umbrella from an unbeliever’s hand! This was a *reductio ad absurdum* with a vengeance.

‘Perhaps you will allow me to go to the Hall and order a carriage?’ he said coldly.

‘No, thank you,’ with vigour, as she pictured Miss Wyngate’s anger. ‘It would take too long—and—and—make such a fuss.’

‘Then I must insist upon leaving my umbrella with you.’

She shook her head.

He looked at her, his anger rising rapidly.

‘I know what you are thinking of,’ he began hotly

‘I was thinking of your hat,’ she answered quietly, but with a gleam of fun from under her long lashes.

‘My hat?’ and he laughed outright, a load lifted from his spirits. ‘Doesn’t it strike you that a line to Lincoln & Bennett will get me another, but there would be no more Miss Dashwoods for love or money, if—’

'Yes there would,' she interrupted quickly. 'My cousin is ever so much better than I.'

'Perfection is awe-striking, but whilst we discuss it, might we not as well be moving on?' he suggested, as he held out the umbrella as a compromise, and she crept under its wing by his side, feeling rather small, but elated at her escape.

Paul enjoyed that walk through the rain immensely. The girl's freshness and simplicity were a revelation to him, accustomed as he had been to his own wife's affectations and absurdities. Nellie talked with a veil of seriousness over all her fun, though the latter would peep out every now and then in spite of her decorous efforts to repress it. She was full of youthful light-heartedness, which lent a charm and a vivacity to her conversation, and broke down the intended barrier of reserve. In fact, it was quite a shock to her to find how far she had gone on the road to friendship, when they reached the open doors of the Hall, and he raised his poor soaked hat in courteous, but reserved farewell.

'But, indeed, you must come in,' she said earnestly, all her hospitable instincts intent on the duty of detaining him. 'My uncle would never forgive me if I let you go.'

'Your uncle must be made of very different stuff to what I credit him with. But good afternoon, Miss Dashwood, I mustn't keep you here in those wet things.'

'Oh, I'm all right. But *do* come in. You can't go off in that horrid rain.'

'Don't abuse the rain. I owe it a debt,' he said gravely, and then he smiled, raised his hat a second time, and walked off.

‘Then good-bye, and thank you so very, very much.’

Nellie’s sweet voice followed him through the rain, and the thought of her girlish personality was a pleasant one to carry home with him. He had felt a strong desire to make one of the family party at tea, but it did not accord with his own feelings of delicacy to presume on the small service he had rendered one of the household, in order to get an *entrée* into the Squire’s house. They were all out when he returned Mr Dashwood’s call; but he had been shown into the drawing-room through a mistake, and had taken stock of the cheerful, home-like room, before the footman came back to show him out with many apologies. As he splashed through the mud he pictured the scene, and, as usually happens, his idea was as far as possible from the reality. Instead of a peaceful party gathered round a silver kettle on a small table covered with a spotless cloth, each member of which made remarks as sweet as the cakes, or as playful as the kitten, a storm ensued as soon as Nellie made her appearance and detailed her adventures.

Maude, with flashing eyes, abused her for accepting the smallest service from a man like the new Baronet.

Nellie said, with unusual meekness,—

‘But, Maude, dear, I couldn’t stay there any longer, and if I had come away without him, I should have got wet through.’

‘I would rather have been drenched,’ cried Maude, coming down upon her cousin with the decision of a sledge-hammer.

Miss Wyngate shook her head solemnly.

'You might at least have waited till your cousin and myself had made his acquaintance.'

'That would have meant waiting till to-morrow, at least, under the thorn,' Nell retorted with a little laugh, 'and I wasn't quite equal to that.'

Aunt Tabitha frowned, but said nothing, for she never attacked any but the defenceless, and in this case the enemy had two allies in the camp.

'What beats me,' exclaimed the Squire, as he pushed up his cup for some more tea, 'is your letting the fellow go back in the rain. He must think us nice hospitable people in Elmsfield!'

'But I besought him to come in. He must have aquatic tastes,' demurely, 'for he liked the rain.'

'When you were in it,' suggested Fitzgerald maliciously, and Nell's cheeks were flaming.

Maude saw the blush, drew her own conclusions, and thought she had a right to be angry; and when a girl comes to this decision she enjoys her own passion intensely. It is so nice to do anything which is usually wrong, but accidentally right, on principle.

Mr Dashwood was still in a state of fume and fuss. He was the most hospitable man under the sun, and he considered that Nell had cast a slur on his favourite virtue. That a 'fellow' should be allowed to turn away from his door in a deluge was more than he could bear with any sort of equanimity, and the more he thought over it, the more irate he grew.

'He must think us a set of savages,' he grumbled, as he disdainfully refused a piece of buttered toast proffered as a peace-offering by his niece. 'I shall write and ask him to dine



with us on Tuesday. No use looking daggers. I'll have my own way in this if in nothing else,' and he marched off to the library with the air of a Cæsar.

'See what you have brought on us!' exclaimed Maude, as soon as the two girls were left alone, looking at her cousin with indignant eyes.

'He's very nice, and very gentlemanly, and I rather like him,' said Nell audaciously.

'All because he has a Greek profile and saucer eyes,' exclaimed Maude, in withering contempt. 'For the sake of these trumpery things you'd forget his *horrible* opinions!'

'I can't forget them, for I've never learnt them. We didn't talk theology under an umbrella in the rain!' her rosebud mouth twitching.

'I hope you didn't talk at all,' severely.

'But we did. Is there anything on earth which could have kept me silent for a mile and a half, short of a respirator?'

'I don't think there is,' very drily. 'Well, you shall have him to yourself on Tuesday. I shall have nothing to do with him,' throwing back her head with exaggerated pride. 'I hate the thought of his coming to the house. I feel as if he would bring some awful misfortune upon us!'

'What nonsense!' opening her eyes in amazement at the agitated look on her cousin's face. 'What harm could he possibly do us?'

'Wouldn't it be harm if he stole you from me?' her voice unsteady, her lips quivering. 'I know, if you married him it would break my heart.'

'You ridiculous old goose!' throwing her arms round her cousin and giving her a passionate hug. 'I—I never want to speak to him again, and I

shall always take an umbrella now, even if the glass says "Set fair."

Maude began to laugh, and the incident ended, as the French say; but the scene made a deep impression on Nellie's mind, and in after years she had bitter cause to remember it.

Paul found his great big house particularly lonely that evening, and it occurred to him that there was no reason on earth why he should not write to some of his Oxford friends and ask them to stay with him. Few men would care to turn into a fossil at twenty-seven, and yet he felt that there was great danger of his becoming one if nobody came to revive him.

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE CURATES OF ST JOHN'S.

IT was eight o'clock on a lovely morning, when every thicket thrilled with the songs of the birds, and every spray was weighted with its burden of heavy dew, when Nature put on its freshest, most Arcadian aspect, and it seemed hard to realise that the peaceful village nestling at the foot of the sun-tipped hills had anything in common with a sin-stained world. Maude Dashwood walked slowly down the sunny road with Lovel by her side, lifting grave eyes to his thoughtful face, as she talked of serious topics in the low, sweet voice which was one of her most charming attributes. The Miss Singletons had not come down to breakfast, so there were no eager eyes to watch as Lovel stopped by the little gate in the park paling, and traced patterns with his stick in the chalky soil at his feet, instead of opening it for Miss Dashwood to pass through.

'The great thing is to keep our motives clear,' he said slowly. 'If the man were a pauper, there would be no difficulty.'

'I don't see why that should make any difference,' said Maude, almost reproachfully. 'To me it would be so much easier to snub a millionaire than a poverty-stricken wretch, and I know it would to you.'

'I don't think it's a question of snubbing,' with a half-impatient sigh. 'If Conway and I make the smallest advances, don't you see what will happen? He will be asking us to tennis, dinner, billiards, and all sorts of things. If we refuse and keep him at arm's-length, would that be consistent with Christian charity? If we don't, we have our people to think of. They might say we thought lightly of his errors.'

'Refuse! I could not bear to think you were eating his bread, or using his lawn, or having anything on earth to do with him.'

She raised her eyes, glowing with defiance, and threw back her head with a gesture of indignant scorn.

Just then Paul rode by on his beautiful thoroughbred, and turned in surprise at meeting any of the upper class out at such an early hour of the morning. He met the indignant flash of the girl's eyes, and felt the blood tingle in his veins. He had an instinctive feeling that all the scorn and the anger were meant for him, and rode on, conscious that in that moment of time he had found a new interest in life. He would have no friends to bother him or get in his way, but he would set himself to work, with all the energy of his disposition, to conquer that girl's hatred. He would never rest till he had forced her to receive him as an equal and a friend. That for the present should be the object of his life; and he had no doubt of the victory, for a man's strong will had every chance in its favour against a girl's caprice.

The colour rushed up into Maude's cheeks; and perhaps that exquisite blush had more effect

on Lovel's determination than he was himself conscious of, for, after all, he was mortal.

'Yes, you are right,' he said gravely, almost sadly; 'those who are about the sanctuary are bound to be more careful than the rest of the world. I will have no more to do with him than I can help.'

'And what am I to do, if my father *will* ask him to the house?'

The temptation was great to tell her to follow his own example. The fellow was so fatally well endowed by Nature, as well as Fortune, as to make him more dangerous than most men. And was he to be cast loose in such a house as Beechwood, to fascinate, perhaps, the sweetest, purest girl against her will, when by one word he could make the danger so infinitely less?

'You must do as your father wishes,' with a visible effort to constrain himself to speak those words instead of others far different in their tenor. 'It would be a mistake to let him think that we have prejudged him.'

'We needn't be uneasy about that. I expect before we have finished our soup he will tell us that Christianity is a fable, and that we only believe in it because we are not all so well-read as himself.'

'He won't do that. If he were such an underbred brute, we should be spared all further trouble about him; but he isn't, from what I hear.'

'You will be able to judge for yourself to-night.'

And then, with a slight bend of the head, she passed through the gate, and he was left outside. He felt as if it were a parable of his life. Only he had closed the gate upon himself, and shut himself out from the garden of earthly love,

turned his back voluntarily on the pathway of pleasure, and chosen the narrow road of denial, long before he saw Maude Dashwood. He would not watch her as she walked with a light, graceful carriage over the dewy grass, with the freshness of the spring in her youth, and the glory of the summer in her beauty. She realised his dream of all that was noblest and sweetest in woman, she was the fruition, as it were, of his long cherished ideal; but he schooled himself to repress that part of his nature to which she most appealed, and tried to think of her only as one of the members of his flock. He succeeded so far as to make the girl herself regard him in the light of her one particular counsellor in all questions of faith or duty. She appealed to him frankly for advice in every difficulty, and never found him wanting. Of course their opinions clashed occasionally, but, although she would maintain her own with a charming wilfulness so long as he was present, she would generally yield to his, on sober reflection, when his back was turned. They did each other good, and influenced each other's ways of thought more than either was aware of. He had such a lofty standard for himself, such an ardent, enthusiastic nature, so eager for self-sacrifice, that he might easily have fallen into the extreme of a stern ascetism, without the girl's sweet influence to soften and restrain. And she might, as easily, have lost her habit of deep and serious thought in the whirlpool of a London season, if she had not known that her truest friend was waiting for her to come back just the same as when she left him.

Lovel's face was so white and drawn when he walked into the small dining-room at the Lodge, that Charlie Conway exclaimed wrathfully,—

'I believe you've been visiting half the old women in the parish, and hadn't the sense to remember that you'd had no breakfast. I've sent out your coffee, and eaten your egg to prevent it from getting cold.'

'Never mind, I'll have some bacon,' drawing a chair to the table.

'No, you sha'n't be a martyr before your time.'

He rang the bell, and Mrs Clowser, their widowed factotum, presently appeared with the coffee-pot, and another egg fresh from its three minutes of boiling water. She had a pleasant face, with smooth fair hair turning grey, and a long nose nearly meeting the up-turned point of her chin. She had buried her husband just in time to undertake the housekeeping for Dr Abbott's two curates, and she was admirably fitted for the position. When either of them had a bad cold, she enjoyed herself exceedingly, as long as he would consent to be nursed, and to swallow the decoctions prepared for him. Now she looked with grave reproach at Lovel's pale face, and said sententiously,—

'If you'd only come home straight after the service like Mr Conway does, you wouldn't be having them headaches, and good victuals wouldn't be wasted.'

'But I haven't the ghost of a headache,' Lovel protested in self-defence; whilst Conway exclaimed, 'The victuals weren't wasted, for I ate them.'

'Ah, but what I say is quite right,' she rejoined, with a solemn shake of her head. 'And

you'll be finding it out for yourselves one day, when I'm no longer here to worrit about you.'

'My dear Clowsie, we couldn't do without you. If you talk of being "no longer here," I shall look out for another curacy.'

'Now, Mr Conway, there you are with your nonsense. It drats me how you can preach them solemn and beautiful words as soon as you get into the pulpit, yet talk no better than the ordinarist man in the parlour.'

'One for you, Charlie,' exclaimed Lovel, his eyes twinkling with fun as the widow retired.

'No good trying to be a hero to your own housekeeper,' he answered, with resignation; 'but I say, Lovel, what do you mean to do about the night-school at Elmersbridge? Taylor has given up, Miss Bright is ill with typhoid fever, and the attendance is worse than ever.'

'We must work them up as well as we can. I'll mention the subject at the Bible-class, and I must take Taylor's place till we find a substitute.'

'No, hang it all! you won't have an evening left. I'll go; I daresay I have a gift for teaching which will astonish the natives.'

'You've a gift for society which astonishes nobody,' said Lovel, with a smile. 'But I had better see after this myself. Nothing will make Taylor come forward again, except showing him that he isn't wanted.'

'Taylor's a brute, and wants kicking.'

'It's a treatment that would suit many people, but we can't undertake it; muscular Christianity has gone out of fashion.'

'St Paul had a fine opportunity for displaying it when he fought with those lions,' meditatively.



‘Yes, and I feel as if we had a lion to fight now.’

‘Why should this confounded atheist come and upset us all?’ grumbled Charlie, as he pushed back his chair and lit his pipe. ‘I’m sure we don’t want him.’

‘Perhaps we do. Everything was going too easily. We must pull ourselves together, and see that we don’t get lax.’

‘Well, I must be off,’ moving towards the door. ‘I’m going to all the most disgusting holes in Elmersbridge, then I shall be able to enjoy my dinner with a good conscience.’

‘But not a good appetite, I’m afraid. Shall you be back for luncheon?’

‘Don’t wait. You didn’t happen to hear why Miss Dashwood was alone to-day?’ with an elaborate air of indifference.

‘Her cousin had a headache,’ said Lovel briefly, as he rang for the breakfast things to be taken away, and then stepped into the garden to escape Mrs Clowser’s stream of talk, and to meditate over his next sermon.

Conway came round the corner, when Lovel thought he was gone, to remark,—

‘Don’t forget to keep a day free for the Oxford and Cambridge. We mustn’t be done out of that.’

‘I won’t give it up if I can help it.’

‘You must help it. The Dashwoods are going, and I’ve promised for us both.’

‘You are always ready to be my sponsor,’ with a smile.

‘Lucky for you,’ with a nod, and then he started off at a brisk pace for his morning’s work.

## CHAPTER V

### A DINNER AT BEECHWOOD.

A GOODLY company of the best county people assembled in the long low drawing-room of the Hall. The scent of innumerable roses and the hum of bees came in through the wide-open windows, and the beauty of the summer evening provided a thoroughly English topic for some halting tongues.

Maude Dashwood reigned supreme on these occasions, and Miss Wyngate retired into vice-royalty, in spite of a very smart head-dress of white laces and feathers, and a black satin dress, which grew shorter year by year as the hem wore out and had to be turned up. Nelly was a sun-beam, flitting here and there with a pleasant little speech, and a glance from her deceitful blue eyes which seemed to make everyone especially welcome; but Maude received her guests with a quiet dignity which sat exceedingly well on her youthful beauty.

She made no difference in her manner whether she spoke to the Countess of Mortimer or to the dowdy wife of a neighbouring rector, except, perhaps, that there was a slight increase of deference because the latter was old and very shy. She was dressed more simply than anyone else in the room, but the lines of the bodice followed

those of a perfect figure, and the long severe train looked in accord with her style. Her brown hair was coiled on the top of her well-shaped head without a jewel or a flower, and the diamond cross, hanging from a solid gold necklet, was her only ornament.

'Your Nugent diamonds remind me of the new atrocity in baronets,' began Lady Mortimer, after a glance round the room through her double-barrelled eye-glasses. She affected a youthful extravagance both in her speech and her dress—which was waste of trouble, for the date of her birth, more than four decades ago, appeared in every peerage.

'What is he? A Buddhist, a Spencerite, or a Mormon?'

'Not a Mormon, for he hasn't a female belonging to him,' looking supremely indifferent to the fact, as she unfurled her feather fan.

'What a pity! When I think of all the good material wasted for lack of a proper amount of men. A good-looking Mormon might work wonders in a place. Are you terribly shocked, Mr Lovel?'

'Not at all,' with a smile, for he knew that she wished him to be. 'There's no chance of the idea spreading, for one wife is enough for any man to manage, and nobody but a lunatic would want a dozen.'

'Oh! if you attempt to manage a woman of course you'll fail,' with a shrug of her ample shoulders. 'Women of the nineteenth century are born to something better than to be helots of man.'

'And yet, if you go to Utah for your ideas, any woman may be content with the tenth fraction of that despised animal.'

The Countess looked at his thoughtful face with a glance of approval, surprised to find that a curate could withstand her as well as any bishop.

Just then the butler threw open the door and announced 'Sir Paul Nugent.'

A sudden silence fell on the buzz of talk, as every eye but Miss Dashwood's turned with eager curiosity towards the door. Paul came in with a quiet air of unconcern, as if too much occupied with some grave subject of thought to take much heed of his surroundings. He bowed low over the hand which Maude extended to him, in her most chilling manner, but if he were frozen by it, he showed no sign of it as he turned to his host.

'Glad to see you,' said the Squire, in his heartiest fashion, for he thought the poor fellow looked 'down in the mouth' as he afterwards explained, and he wanted to cheer him up. 'Let me introduce you to Lord Mortimer, Colonel Ponsonby, and Mr Sutherland, all near neighbours and old friends of your uncle's.'

They shook hands with the new man, and made him welcome, but with a certain reserve, for, as the Colonel confided to a friend, 'It was never wise to put too much money on a dark horse.'

Paul had a curious way of seeing through people at a glance; and he knew as well as possible that these cautious country gentlemen were bent on watching him closely before they meant to recognise him as a neighbour, and were rather taken aback at Mr Dashwood's rash friendliness.

Dinner was announced, and fortunately prevented any awkwardness. Paul had just assumed his sternest air, when Nellie came up to him, smiling, and carried him off to introduce him to Miss

Seldon, a younger sister of Lady Mortimer's, who had as many brains as the Countess, but none of her personal attractions. By the Squire's special desire, the Baronet occupied a seat at Maude's left hand ; and as she seemed entirely engrossed with the Earl on her other side, he had plenty of opportunities of studying her profile, though none of improving her acquaintance till far on through the courses. At last Lord Mortimer threw a remark across the table which sounded rather like a challenge, and made Nellie, at least, look up in alarm, whilst Maude turned for the first time with any show of interest to her neighbour on the left.

'Your uncle had a splendid library, Sir Paul,' began the Earl in rather a gruff voice. 'There's nothing to equal it in the county. His father, and his grandfather before him, made great additions to it, but it was Sir Thomas, year after year, who filled up all the blank spaces. Nothing much in your line, I fancy?'

'On the contrary, I prize that library far more than anything else I possess,' said Paul very quietly, though inwardly annoyed at the slur on his scholarship.

'Yes ; but you misunderstand me,' leaning forward with a half-malicious look in his shrewd eyes. 'Your uncle was a Churchman to the backbone ; and the books he collected round him would be wasted on you.'

'My uncle was not so narrow-minded as to confine his purchases to one school of thought,' rather haughtily ; 'and it is useless for any man to attempt to advocate his own cause without some analysis of his opponent's.'

'You didn't know Sir Thomas as well as I

did. He would have kicked a volume of Renan's, B  uer's, or Stra  uss's down his marble steps.'

'Excuse me, he left them on his shelves—but with the leaves uncut.'

'Ah! the leaves uncut,' drawing in his lips as if that admission were delightful to him.—'The only way to deal with a spiritual nihilist.'

'Yes, if you are afraid of him,' said Lovel, quietly joining in the conversation as soon as he saw that Lord Mortimer was making a mess of it. 'But you would never conquer doubt by stifling it.'

'I don't know that,' said Paul, thinking, perhaps, of his own experience in the past. 'If you study it, and analyse it, it is sure to spread, for it is as infectious as the small-pox.'

'Yes, but if we fled from disease it would only follow us, and run us into a corner at last. The only sensible way is to find the cure, and stamp it out.'

'Yes, if there be a cure,' in a low voice, as if half to himself, but Lovel caught the words, and his face flushed.

'There is a cure, if you look for it, but you won't find it in the works of the negative speculatists. If doubt had never lifted its hydra-head before the nineteenth century, we might have been at a loss how to meet it. Now we have our weapons ready,' his eyes lighting up as if eager for battle.

'But the nineteenth century has proved an awkward customer,' said Paul, with a quiet smile, as he thought of the rough attack which had been made on the Hexateuch. 'I suppose you will allow that?'

'On the contrary, it has been of the greatest service to us, for every attack has only taught us how to make our footing secure.'

‘Evolution was a blow, I presume?’

‘I don’t acknowledge that for a moment,’ stimulated by an eager look from Maude, though reluctant to continue what he considered an ill-timed discussion. ‘We take our stand on truth, nothing else. If there is truth in evolution, it must be an explanation of revelation. If there is not, it may be a flat denial, but it can do us no harm.’

‘I consider Darwin a most disappointing man,’ struck in Lady Mortimer. ‘I took an immensity of trouble in order to get him up; but where’s the good of telling us what we all come from? It’s past and gone. Very disagreeable to think we descend from a hideous ape—instead of Adam—but—’

‘Take Adam for your standpoint, Lady Mortimer,’ suggested Conway, ‘and let the ape remain in his primary insignificance.’

‘I think I will,’ with a smile, as if she were making a gracious concession to our common ancestor. ‘But to return to what I was saying. If Darwin could only tell us what was going to become of us in the future, or what would happen to our children and our children’s children, I should see some good in him, and I should devour his books from morning to night.’

‘It would be very awkward if he could,’ said the Squire, looking amused. ‘Fancy how it would cloud your life if you found out that your little Lady Rose would run away with a shoe-maker.’

‘I would rather see her in her grave,’ cried the Countess indignantly.

‘Yes,’ with a mischievous twinkle in his eye; but she couldn’t get there till her marriage was

an accomplished fact—supposing that it were in her destiny.’

‘It seems strange that we should know what a comet is going to do a century hence,’ said Maude thoughtfully, ‘and yet be in the dark about tomorrow in all that concerns ourselves.’

‘If man were under the same fixed laws as the stars, there would not be much room for Providence,’ answered Lovel, who always caught every word that dropped from her lovely lips, and often by some short sentence raised her unspoken thoughts to a higher level.

‘No wonder that you are wishing for fixed laws, Miss Dashwood, at a time when every law is only made to be upset,’ interposed Lord Mortimer, trying to turn the conversation to a more mundane topic. ‘I pity judge and jury; for directly a criminal is condemned there is a hue and cry against them both; and women are always the worst offenders in that line.’

‘Because sure justice, like cold reason, never appealed to a woman yet,’ said Paul quietly, wanting to rouse Maude to a retort.

In this he partly succeeded, for she turned and looked him straight in the face for the first time, as she said coldly,—

‘I don’t agree with you. Justice is all that I should ever wish to claim.’

‘For yourself, perhaps, but not for your friends?’ inquiringly. ‘Cannot you conceive a case when justice would be the acme of cold comfort?’

A slight shade passed over her expression, and she gave him one swift glance of anxious questioning, as if to see if there were any hidden intention in his speech; but it was evidently a shot delivered



at random. The refined beauty of his face struck her with surprise, for she had never studied it before ; but there was no malice in the thoughtful eyes, and, with a sense of relief, she answered proudly,—

‘I should be sorry to own a friend who could wish for more.’

‘You forget that justice is pitiless, or else you have an inordinately high idea of human nature,’ he persisted, anxious to draw her out, for he thought he saw signs of a wish to withdraw into her shell.

‘God knows I haven’t that,’ she said hurriedly, as if the words were forced from her against her will ; and for an instant it seemed to him as if he caught a glimpse of her inner nature, where trouble and pain, and passionate longing, were hidden from the outside world under a bearing of cold indifference. If Maude Dashwood, the heiress of Beechwood, surrounded by love and comfort, and all the pleasures of life, in splendid health, in the happiest of homes, had some secret sorrow like the worm in the root of a rose-tree, who was safe? The problem interested him so much that he forgot to answer ; but Colonel Ponsonby, who had been unusually silent, struck in with a sarcastic smile : ‘Lives there the man with soul so dead, who never to himself hath said, my own—*my hateful race*? Talk of a high idea of human nature, I don’t know where you are to get it from. Instead of looking forward to a millennium of perfected humanity, such as Comte raved about, I can only see that we are tending towards an age when vice and degradation will reach their apotheosis.’

‘Too bad of you, Ponsonby,’ said Lord Mortimer, with a short laugh, for he always derived a fund

of amusement from the morbid speeches of his pessimistic old friend. 'You shouldn't talk like that in an age when philanthropy is positively rampant, and every chit of eighteen, with a musical talent or a pretty face, thinks it her mission to elevate the masses.'

'Yes, but how about the classes?' asked the Colonel, with bushy eyebrows drawn down over his double eye-glasses. 'Who talks of elevating *them*?'

'I leave that gigantic task to the Church, and I'm sure that Lovel, for one, will be equal to the attempt,' with a laughing bow to the Curate. 'Come and dine with me next—when shall I say? you are such a fearfully busy man!'

'You see our Rector is absent,' began Lovel hesitatingly, for he did not wish to bring out a list of his engagements—night-schools, evening services, etc., etc., for he was the last man to make a parade of his duties.

'His normal condition, so that makes no difference,' said the Earl, with a dash of contempt for the absent man; and then he turned to Sir Paul with a smile, and, quite forgetful of his opinions, said, 'Curious how hard it is to make these priests understand that we are as much members of their flock, as Polly or Jemima in the back slums of Elmersbridge!'

Paul looked surprised, but at the same moment Maude rose, and gave the signal for the ladies to retire, and the remark remained unanswered.

'More "fox" than "lamb,"' whispered Lady Mortimer, with a quizzical look, as she passed Lovel.

A shrug of the shoulders was the only reply he had time for.

## CHAPTER VI.

### SIR THOMAS'S PRACTICAL JOKE.

'WE have one taste in common, Miss Dashwood!' remarked Sir Paul with a smile, as he stood by the piano, ready to turn over the leaves as soon as she decided on her song.

The slender white fingers stopped abruptly.

'I suppose you mean music, a taste which is also shared by the savages?'

'No, though I do share that taste with other people besides the savages. I was alluding to early rising.'

'Then you are mistaken,' with an accent of relief, as if she disdained to acknowledge any chord of sympathy with her new neighbour. 'As a fact, I hate it; as a means to an end, I—almost love it,' flushing slightly.

'Isn't that a paradox?'

'Not at all; the means towards the noblest ends have generally been rather trying to self-indulgence.'

'Is it self-indulgence to lie in bed till a reasonable hour?' he asked tentatively, feeling that he was in the dark as to her real motives.

'Yes, on a Saint's day, when— But what is the good of discussing it with you?' she added,

with some impatience in her voice as well as her hands, as she placed the piece of music on its stand. 'You could lie in bed from morning till night without any pangs of conscience, of course.'

His face flushed, and his straight brows drew together, whilst his voice took a tone of concentrated anger which rather appalled her, as he answered scornfully,—

'Yes, and I could lie, and rob, and murder. I could commit every vice known to man, just because I'm more honest than half society, and don't feign a belief I cannot feel!'

'I don't want to offend you,' she said, looking up at him with a puzzled look in her soft grey eyes, 'but I cannot see what is to restrain you.'

'I can't admire virtue, because I haven't been taught it in a catechism?'

'Yes, you would admire it,' she said thoughtfully, 'as you might a beautiful picture. But I should have thought it as hard for you to practise it, as it would be impossible for you to paint the picture if you weren't an artist.'

'Can anyone throw a stone at Huxley, Tyn-dall, or Häckel, and say they were monsters of iniquity?' he asked quickly. 'People can keep their lives fairly straight, I can assure you, even when they are fettered by no dogmas.'

'Yes, and a rudderless boat may sometimes come to port,' with a provoking smile.

'And the rudder may fail in the storm,' he said briefly.

Without answering, she began her song, and poured forth such a flow of melody that he was forced to listen in almost unwilling admiration, though his veins were tingling with the com-

bative instinct, and his heart was hot with suppressed indignation. Maude had chosen a song which expressed her mood—the mood into which she had worked herself when in contact with cold materialism. Angry, defiant, reckless, and triumphant, the music seemed to wake uneasy echoes in the hearts of some of those who listened; and Nellie looked anxious, as if she were puzzled to know the reason of it.

‘Maude never sings that except when she is angry,’ she said to Lovel, as he leant against the wall, his clearly-cut features looking like a cameo against the dark background of a Murillo. ‘Do go and deliver her from that horrid man. He must have been saying something very aggressive.’

“‘They say that a lion will turn and flee  
From a maid in the pride of her purity,’”

to quote Byron for the second time to-night. How surprised he must be if he hears me, for he has gone so completely out of fashion.’

‘Yes, and he’s so much more easy to understand than the later ones,’ with a sigh, as if she had been asked to stretch her mental faculties too far over the subtleties of our modern bards. ‘But what was your idea?’

‘It struck me that the rankest heretic would look on Miss Dashwood’s face, and have the grace to hold his tongue.’

Then he roused himself with a sudden sigh, and went towards the piano, whilst Nellie looked after him with a sort of wistful kindness in her blue eyes.

Captain Fitzgerald slipped into the seat by her side, and implored her to talk him back into sanity.

'If you don't, I shall have a nightmare of Lady Mortimer. The woman thinks she can talk, and so she goes at it with a vengeance. The strike-question she would have settled in half a minute. If the English labourers chose to grumble, she would have Germans. Germans go anywhere, do anything, live on nothing, and are always content. Then came a fling at the Bishop because he went away, and left the Cardinal to settle up. Finally, she went hammer and tongs at vice in the east end, and I verily believe she considers murder as a wholesome corrective.'

'Would she like it tried on herself? Do you know I'm such a goose, Fitz,' with a deprecatory glance up into his irritated face, 'that I can't talk about any of those big questions.'

'Thank Heaven! Leave them to the ugly and elderly. Take a basket on your arm, by all means, to the poor starving wretches at Elmersbridge; but, for Heaven's sake, don't call yourself a philanthropist.'

'No, that would be rather too large a word to tack on to a mould of jelly, or a scrap of pudding,' with a merry little laugh. 'But do go and talk to Sir Paul!' casting an anxious look in the Baronet's direction, for he was standing alone, as it were, amongst a knot of men, who were talking eagerly with each other, but without a word for him. Englishmen, as a rule, are not catholic in their sympathies, and the new man was not supposed to be interested in questions concerning the people of the place; so he was left out in the cold, to chew the cud of his own bitter reflections, whilst they were discussing the case of Job Warner, who was caught poaching trout by the river.

Charlie Conway was not the kind of man to let any prejudice of any sort hinder him from an act of courtesy. He had as firm a faith as the veriest bigot, and as great a horror of scepticism as the truest Churchman; but he separated Sir Paul's opinions from Sir Paul's personality, and, whilst the former repelled him, the latter attracted him magnetically.

'You were in Munich a few months ago, I believe?' he asked, as a harmless beginning which could not offend the tenderest susceptibilities. 'What did you think of the disputed Murillos?'

'I never went near them,' curtly, and then his face brightened as he noticed the other man's expression of kindly courtesy. 'Do you care for fishing?' he asked, seized with a sudden wish to make friends.

'Care for it? I've a perfect craze.'

'Then come whenever you like.'

'If you knew me better, you would be afraid of my taking you at your word.'

'No, I'm not exactly run after down here,' bitterness flooding his heart as he thought of Maude and her evident hostility. 'My uncle's will puzzled me immensely, but in the welcome I receive from my neighbours I find its solution.'

'Yes, with all its faults, Elmsfield is decidedly hospitable,' said Conway, wilfully misunderstanding him.

'No, Elmsfield is entirely faultless. I don't suppose a man would dare to get drunk within the sound of its church bells; but cordiality to strangers, if you understand hospitality to mean that, is *not* one of its many virtues. My uncle

had lived here all his life, he knew the place and its prejudices, and he meant me to do penance for all my sins of omission.'

'You really believe this?' looking up at his stern face in surprise, his easy-going nature staggered by Nugent's morbidity. 'Public opinion assigned a far more romantic reason for that one condition.'

'Revenge was nearer the mark than romance. But tell me what they say?' in a tone of careless indifference.

'I can't do that,' very decidedly, for Conway was already beginning to be sorry that he had ever broached the subject. 'You may find it out for yourself one day; but I hope to Heaven you never will!' he added mentally.

Just then Lady Mortimer looked over her shoulder, and beckoned Sir Paul with her grey feather fan. She was very civil to him, for she had just made up her mind that he would make a suitable match for her sister. It would give such an interest to Josephine Seldon's life to marry a man with materialistic or atheistic views. She was always in need of a vent for her superabundant energies, and Sir Paul might afford her a field of endless effort. It did not matter to Lady Mortimer in the least that Miss Seldon was probably several years older than the Baronet. He was surprisingly old for his age, and Joe was unusually young, so that the two might easily meet on a hypothetical level. Miss Seldon was a worthy individual, with sound views on the majority of the questions of the day, and (still greater virtue) without the modern craze for expounding them to the first comer; and, though



she was without personal attraction, she would be an eminently satisfactory helpmate for any man who was wise enough to appreciate her.

Lady Mortimer, having considered the situation, and decided that it was a first-rate chance for her sister, made a dash at Paul Nugent in her usual spasmodic fashion. She was not vulgar enough to throw her sister at his head, but she made herself as agreeable as she could; and allowed him to perceive that she considered him specially interesting because he did not run in the same groove as all 'the dear old-fashioned people' at Elmsfield. During the conversation, she startled him by alluding to the cross which Miss Dashwood wore, as the finest specimen of the Nugent diamonds.

'But you must have known it,' she said, as he expressed his surprise. 'It was in the will, and you were there, of course, when it was read.'

'No. I came as soon as I could, but I was too late. Of course Mr Blake read me the will afterwards, but I was not interested in the details.'

'How disdainfully you talk of those diamonds, as if they were jewels from the Lowther Arcade. Do you know that they once belonged to Marie Antoinette, and that they are worth a fabulous sum?'

'They did not save their former owner from the guillotine. If they had, I should have valued them more.'

'No. Diamonds never saved a woman from destruction—yet. It has rather been the other way. But don't you think it was cruel of the old man to separate them from the rest of the family jewels?'

Not a bit. Jewels are made for pretty

women; and Miss Dashwood can wear them when I can't. Unless you would like me to go about like a pawnbroker?' he added, with a smile.

'I told Maude she ought to have had the stones taken out. They would have been too deliciously lovely in the form of a toad or a monkey.'

'You had the courage to say that to Miss Dashwood?' raising his eyebrows.

'Oh, yes! I've all the audacity suitable to the woman of the day,' she said, as proudly as if she were claiming the highest virtue; 'but dear Maude is so very *bornée*. She walks in one straight line, with her head, so to speak, amongst the stars. It's all very well to have a high standard, but it needn't reach to the top of the Eiffel Tower.'

'I shall be content to grovel at the foot.'

'You will have me for a companion, as well as Joe,' with a would-be-fascinating smile. 'A too utterly rarified atmosphere is too much for us, either mentally or bodily.'

'You are not afraid of being lost among the crowd of the commonplace?' with a slight curl at the corners of his mouth.

'The commonplace! Frightful idea, enough to drive me into a balloon, or on to the wings of a parachute.' As she spoke, she rose from the *causeuse* on which she had been lounging. 'I am going now, but I hope before long we shall meet again; and I shall try to convince you that we encourage anything and everything at the Castle but "the commonplace."'

'I claim to be nothing more and nothing less,

Lady Mortimer,' Paul said, as he bowed low over the well-gloved but thin, unattractive hand she gave him, 'so I am afraid your doors must be shut against me.'

'By claiming nothing, you prove yourself an original at once, and the doors will be opened wide.'

With a gracious bend of her head, she moved on, and presently the party broke up.

As Sir Paul drove home through the moonlit lanes, he was absorbed in his own reflections, which were not of the most exhilarating description. He felt that he had not made any way with the people whom he was most capable of appreciating. The Squire had been kind, simply because it was his duty to be so to a guest; but Miss Nellie Dashwood had gone back from the friendliness begotten under the shade of a shared umbrella, and Miss Dashwood had been distinctly inimical. Before his marriage, he had plunged into the thick of London society, and his face was as well-known in the Row as in the pigeon-shooting enclosure at Hurlingham. Women always received him graciously, and men were generally ready to chum with him. Nobody made it his or her business to ask him after his form of faith; and no charming girl ever refused to dance with him because she had never seen him in St Peter's or St Paul's on Sunday morning. It was a cruel practical joke on the part of his uncle to plant him like a note of exclamation in a pious parish, where the church bell was going twice a day, and religion seemed a living reality, and not the ghost of a dead idea, as Paul had been accustomed to consider it.

## CHAPTER VII.

### PREJUDICE.

SIR PAUL NUGENT, as far as outward appearances were concerned, settled down comfortably into his *rôle* of a country squire. He rode or walked over the whole estate, judging of everything with his own eyes, instead of trusting to those of his agent. In this he was acting from no high sense of virtue, because he found a pleasure in busying himself about anything, for time hung heavily on his hands. If it had been dull, wintry weather, he could have shut himself up in his library, and been perfectly content with his favourite authors ; but his youth was too strong within him to allow of his staying indoors when the sunshine was flooding the lawn, and the roses were waiting for someone beside the bees to admire them. The tenants considered him a model landlord, for he listened patiently to all their complaints, noting down every roof that had to be repaired, every room that had to be white-washed, every gate or paling that had to be mended, in his note-book. The builders and carpenters of the neighbourhood thought there was no one to compare to him ; for, in his eagerness to put everything to rights, he found jobs for all those who had been out of work.

It had been very hard for Mr Harcourt, the agent, to squeeze the requisite amount of money out of Sir Thomas Nugent's pocket during the last years of his life, and much of the fencing had given way, and gates were often firmly fastened at one end, which had broken away from their hinges at the other. Paul gave his orders in an imperial style, for he found himself possessed of a large fortune with no one to spend it on except himself and his tenants; and it seemed to him that he could never get to the end of it. But he was a man of firm, unyielding disposition, uninfluenced by grumbling or abuse, and he was neither to be talked out of a project on which he had set his heart, or talked into a so-called improvement which failed to meet with his approbation. Therefore he had many conflicts with his agent, in which his will was always triumphant, but which left a residuum of discontent behind. Mr Harcourt was foolish enough to have an opinion of his own, which he was in the habit of considering as good as his master's; but he soon discovered that he had to give in to every order, or go, and he chose the pleasanter alternative of the two. It is doubtful if he ever disliked any man more than the new Baronet, although, if brought to book, he would have been obliged to acknowledge that he had really nothing to complain of. But most people prefer their own way to that of their neighbour; and Harcourt was so self-opinionated that he preferred it to anything else. It gave him no satisfaction to see a new roof put on to a cottage if he had recommended that it should be only patched; and he was disgusted at another being painted on the outside, when he had only advised

a coating of whitewash on the inside. He thought Sir Paul was mad on the subject of improvements, and shook his head solemnly over what he considered his reckless expenditure. But, if the agent was annoyed, the tenants were delighted, and vowed that they would not change landlords with anyone else in the county. A stream of gold seemed to be flowing over the place, and the man who set it going was the man for them.

Paul was not elated by the popularity which he had bought by means of a miser's hoarded riches. He gauged its worth at its true value, and would have sold it all for one friendly look from Maude Dashwood's grey eyes, or one kindly grasp of the hand from the Rev. Herbert Lovel. He felt certain that these two were especially inimical to him; and yet, by a strange perversity, their friendship seemed more valuable than that of all the rest.

Charlie Conway often came for a stroll by the river side, fishing-rod in hand, and Paul Nugent was delighted to see him. They had many pleasant talks together, and sometimes on an 'off night,' when there was no class and no service, he prevailed on the younger curate to stay to dinner. They were both young, and they enjoyed a chat about their Oxford days, and told each other all the good stories they could remember of fellow-undergraduates; but Paul recognised in Lovel a man of unusual intellectual power, and he longed to measure his strength with him. Nothing he would have liked better than to get him into a quiet corner of the library, and entangle him in an earnest discussion on natural science, or to probe his scholarship, and see if he was well grounded in anything besides patristic theology. There was

certain to be much common ground on which they could debate and argue, for ever, without seriously offending a priest's prejudices.

But Lovel rarely came to the house ; and even when he came, his visits were so short, that there was no opportunity for anything but the most casual and conventional conversation. Lovel was not conscious of any coldness of manner when talking to Paul Nugent ; but the latter, who was more sensitive than he appeared to be, felt as if the curate were determined to keep him outside his life, and never to admit him within the charmed circle of his intimacy.

It was the same with Maude Dashwood. Ever since that first evening at the Hall, she seemed averse to talking to him except on the lightest of subjects. She would ask him about the last step in dancing, or that queer sensational novel just fresh from the press. She would tell him her views about the school feast, and discuss the rival merits of rounders and cricket, and then she would turn to Lovel, if he happened to be near her ; her whole manner would change, and in less than a minute they would be deep in a conversation in which the highest interests of life were engaged.

It was inexpressibly galling to Nugent to be confined to trivial chit-chat such as a schoolboy might have enjoyed, when he knew that he could say something worth hearing, if she would only have cared to listen. He often took refuge with Nellie, and after a while they seemed to get on famously together ; for she was of a kindly, sociable disposition, and her stand-offish manner slipped from her like a mackintosh when it is no longer wanted. He knew that she was charming, and

her low, happy laugh was like music to his ears; but in the midst of a war of words, when witticisms were bandied from one to the other, one look from Maude's grave eyes was enough to dry up his unusual flow of gaiety, and all his old bitterness settled down upon him like a cloud. He told himself that Miss Dashwood was ridiculously stuck up, that her nature was as unresponsive as that of a jelly-fish, that her mind was warped by superstition, and narrowed by prejudice; and yet it seemed to him that she was placed on some high pinnacle which shadowed his life. He could not get away from it, for even at The Chase he seemed to live in its shadow—a shadow unlike any other, for it was there in the light as well as the darkness; an absolute chimera, perhaps, but in its effects as real as the old grey house of his forefathers, or the balance stored at his bankers.

Mentally he could not help drawing comparisons between Maude Dashwood and Perdita. Maude's beauty, in its pale, proud purity, might belong to a saint; her hopes, her deepest interests were centred in the higher life of which the noblest and the best have dreamt; and with a sweet unselfishness she devoted herself to the sick and the sorry, and all who had stumbled on the weary road of life; whilst Perdita had never had a thought beyond the present, a hope beyond her personal enjoyment; and the loveliness which had been bestowed upon her so abundantly, would never have raised a man to a higher level than her own—down amongst the worldlings, where every high aspiration was stifled in the frivolous race after pleasure. The two women were as far apart as possible, though much alike as to the accidents of birth and position.



By contact with the one, Paul had embittered his nature and darkened his past. It remained to be seen what the other would bring him in the course of the coming years. Their paths must necessarily lie close together. Accident, if not design, would often bring them under the same roof. He could not avoid her, even if he would ; in truth, he felt an overpowering force of attraction which drove him towards her, a force that he could not resist, even when he knew from the bruised state of his feelings, that it would have been wiser to be repelled.

Suddenly he roused himself into a state of rebellion. In common respect to his uncle's memory, he had been forced to keep quiet during the first few months of his stay, but when the end of August came round, he determined to remain no longer alone in his large house, like a hermit in a cave as big as Aladdin's. He called about him some of his friends whom he had dropped on account of his marriage, and most of them were only too glad to escape from the dust and heat of London to the cool, sweet shade of the immemorial elms at The Chase.

Edward Landon had distinguished himself at Balliol, and was beginning to make his mark at the Bar. Mark Ferrol had written a few clever articles for the *Nineteenth Century*, and was now thinking of starting a review on his own account. Whilst Edwin Montgomery was engaged on some important work which he kept very much to himself. They were all eager sportsmen, and were looking forward to the 1st of September to sign the death-warrant of countless partridges.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### IS RELIGION SUPERSTITION ?

‘I SHOULD think you might live like a patriarch in this quiet corner of the world, thinking of nothing but your flocks and herds, your crops and your produce, till you turned into a vegetable, without more mind than a potato,’ Mark Ferrol remarked, as he lounged at his ease on the cushioned sill of one of the library windows, and knocked the ash off the tip of his cigar on to the smooth gravel of the terrace. He was rather plain, with a thoughtful forehead, and an earnest look in his eyes, which contrasted oddly with the smile which hung about his mobile lips.

‘Not a bit of it. Fancy turning into a vegetable within half-an-hour or so of the teeming life of London!’ exclaimed Paul indignantly. ‘You must get out of reach of post, paper, or telegram; and then I doubt if you could manage it in this overcrowded island. You would be sure to come in contact with a neighbour in your first walk or ride.’

‘Talk of neighbours, how do you get on with the parsons of the place?’ inquired Landon, as he threw down the Virgil he had been looking through for a quotation. ‘Do they go over to the other side of the road when they pass you, or do they

pocket their principles for the sake of your subscriptions?’

‘Bad policy to quarrel with a man who has a house like this over his head,’ suggested Ferrol, gazing up at the beautifully-carved ceiling with genuine admiration.

‘I should get more attention from them if I lived in a hovel,’ said Paul, flushing slightly. ‘There’s no humbug about them. I verily believe they would rather have a halfpenny from a pauper, who was one of themselves, than a hundred pounds from one of us.’

‘The funds of Elmsfield parish must be in a most flourishing condition,’ said Landon drily, ‘or else your parsons must be very different to the usual run of human beings. “Take everything you can get,” is the general maxim.’

‘Not with everyone. You can’t believe that, or you must be as great a pessimist as an old colonel in this neighbourhood.’

‘I should like to make his acquaintance. This is an age of universal self-satisfaction, and a man who was pleased with nothing would be quite refreshing.’

‘As refreshing as a November fog,’ laughed Ferrol, ‘and about as exhilarating. A pessimist draws a curtain of gloom round everything, and tries to stifle himself as well as his neighbours.’

‘Whilst we throw open the windows and doors, and let the daylight stream in wherever it likes. Those who fetter themselves with a creed are, after all, no better than fools who handcuff themselves when the police would let them off,’ said Paul combatively, although there was nobody to oppose him.

It was more as if he were contradicting a thought

of his own, than throwing a bone of contention before the others. Landon gave him a searching glance, and said quietly,—

‘The question is, does it make a man happier or better to believe too much? Superstition—by which I mean all cognate form of religion—is bound to be swept away in the course of time by the broom of knowledge; and I bet you that man will be just as happy and just as moral when the process is complete.’

‘I doubt it,’ said Paul, looking out of the window, across the undulating park, to where the spire of St John’s church pointed heavenwards amongst a sea of foliage. His thoughts flew to Herbert Lovel and Maude Dashwood, whose lives seemed beautiful even to his wondering eyes as he watched them from outside the pale. ‘If religion be only superstition, why has it made so many angels upon earth?’

‘I’ve never met any myself,’ said Landon, with a smile. ‘Science does not recognise their existence; evolution can’t go further than man, and there’s precious little of the angel in *him*.’

‘Bah! you only judge by what you see in the law-courts,’ with an expression of disgust; ‘but you can’t deny—no one can deny—that both men and women have risen to the noblest heights through this same thing that we call superstition.’

‘Certainly, there is a proneness to self-sacrifice in some natures; they positively enjoy it, but they must be drunk to do it,—drunk with enthusiasm I mean,’ Landon added quickly, as the others looked up, either in horror or surprise.

‘Or with bhang, as the sepoy when they spitted themselves on the points of our bayonets,’ suggested Ferrol.

'There will be no enthusiasm left when science takes the place of superstition,' said Paul, with a sudden realisation of the future dreariness that would come upon the world, such as had never struck him before. 'We can't enthuse, as the Americans say about force or matter, and no one would give away his life for the sake of the Bathybian theory.'

'Do you want him to?' quickly, as if he were trying to confuse a witness, and hurry him into a dangerous admission. 'Think of the thousands who have died for an idea, the terrible waste of life during the days of Nero and Domitian, and, later on, under the Inquisition. Do you want them back again?'

'No, but we shall become detestably prosaic when we clear away all the mists, and leave nothing to the imagination.'

'Bosh! all the misery in the world is due to imagination,' rejoined the barrister contemptuously. 'Give me a good solid fact, there's nothing half so satisfactory. You can grasp it; you can pommel it; you can try your strength on it; it can't slip through your fingers, and leave you beating the air.'

'I wish you would beat a retreat,' suggested Edwin Montgomery, from the depths of an arm-chair, in which he was studying a tome half as big as himself. 'You fellows talk so much that I can't get anything into my head. A library is meant, I believe, for study and silence.'

'Yes, like the reading-room of the British Museum,' laughed Ferrol. 'I was trying to get some data to go upon for my next little effort. The whole subject required an immense amount of

thought, and I could not get on a bit because of two girls whispering together about the last delicious thing in frocks ; disgusting ! as if a reading-room were made for a set of giggling inanities.'

'It is only meant for Woman, with a capital W,' and Paul smiled as the remembrance of a quaint figure came before his mental vision. 'Woman, with towzled hair, blue spectacles, and a gown that would have been too much for a Venus.'

'Very much too much, I hope,' said Landon quietly, 'for her garments, as usually depicted, wouldn't take yards of stuff. Now look here, Nugent, before we degenerate into absolute twaddle, let us go out and stretch our legs, and leave Montgomery to do the same by the thing he calls his mind.'

'All right, I'll take you through Elmsfield, as well conducted a village as you ever saw, where the cottages are as spick and span as if they belonged to a child's toy ; the women never quarrel, the men never get drunk, the children never fight in the one straggling street, and then—'

'Ah, I thought there was to be a contrast ; such a foreground of virtue ought to have a perspective of vice,' put in Ferrol, who was always on the look-out for copy.

'You've hit it ; for a worse place than Elmersbridge, 'pon my word, I believe, never existed. One suburb of it is poked in like a slice of naughtiness into the Elmsfield cake ; but you shall see it, and judge for yourselves ; Montgomery is dying to get rid of us.'

'I'm coming with you,' murmured Montgomery, indulging in a stretch after he had replaced the heavy volume in its hole on the shelf. 'You've addled my brains between you, so that I can't

understand Porphyry's arguments a bit. I'm wasting my time.'

'Do you ever do anything else?' asked Ferrol, with the brutality of old friendship.

'Yes, sometimes,' with a sigh; 'but not when you are in it.'

It was a chilly day, when invalids would have shivered, and drawn their wraps closer round their shrinking necks, but the four men found nothing the matter with the weather as they made their way over the soft green turf, and breasted the tall ferns which had spread like a flood of verdure over the picturesque slopes of the park, wherever the elms left them standing-room. Sir Paul Nugent fully appreciated their admiration of the park, and good-natured envy of its owner; but he was conscious of an element of discontent in the depths of his heart, which no property in the world could satisfy. He did not guess its origin, and therefore could not tell what it meant; but his own lot, when he compared it with that of most of his friends, seemed so highly favoured, that he had no resource but to call himself the most dissatisfied fellow under the sun. The sight of the little church nestling amongst the trees, with the Curates' house close at hand, like a treasure with its guardians, always raised a feeling of bitterness within him that he could not account for.

'A very good specimen of the attempt to revive old Gothic,' said Ferrol, with his head on one side, as he surveyed the square tower critically. 'Don't often see it done so well. I suppose we can go inside?'

'I think we had better not,' said Paul hurriedly. 'There will be a service presently.'

‘Why, to-day’s nothing in particular, is it?’ opening his eyes.

‘But they have it twice every day, and I don’t know how many times on Sundays.’

‘Good Heavens! Do they expect a congregation to keep up with them?’

‘They not only expect it, but they get it. Come on, or it will be getting late before we reach Elmersbridge, and I want you to see it in all its beauty.’

Paul strode on determinedly, for he had a strange distaste to being found hanging about the church by either Lovel or Conway.

‘Halloa! “House to let,”’ exclaimed Landon. ‘Montgomery, here’s just the little place to suit you. Your clerical neighbours would have nothing to do with you,’ glancing from the Lodge to a small white house beyond; ‘and you could meditate at your ease over “the great work” with which you are to astonish the world by-and-by.’

‘Thanks,’ said Montgomery placidly. ‘Great works don’t get on in little houses. They want a library as large as Nugent’s.’

‘There’s a hint for you, Paul. Adopt him as a brother on the spot.’

Paul smiled, but gave no other answer, for his attention was riveted by a feminine figure which appeared for one minute at the door of the white house. It was but a glimpse that he caught of a perky hat, with a nodding plume, a little black mantle, and a plaid skirt; but a cold, sickening feeling of disgust crept over him, and in a moment the library at The Thickets rose before his eyes. He saw Perdita lying at his feet, with a strand of yellow hair across the cold, dead beauty of her



face. He saw the servants standing round, their homely countenances altered by the scared questioning of their gaze. He saw Dr Goodwin come in with heavy solemnity, in place of the usual cheery greeting—and then through the silence came the sentence of death! He felt the horror of it in the icy chill which crept through his veins, and he set his teeth in the old agony of mind. Was he a brute to have forgotten it, when it would only be three years ago that autumn?

The other men went on talking, but he heard not a scrap of their conversation, staggered out of his usual indifference by the vividness of that detestable memory. What had called it up with that terrible distinctness, as if it were happening now, this very day? Surely it could not be that insignificant looking figure at the door of that little white house? And then with a shock it came across him that it had reminded him of Julia Goodwin, the woman who had bothered him by her senseless attentions when he was a bachelor, and who had afterwards developed into the friend and confidante of his faulty little wife. He consoled himself by thinking that it was only a fancied resemblance. There could be no reason why Miss Goodwin should transplant herself from the home in which she delighted, and where she was intimate with a large circle of middle-class friends, to a strange place where there would be no one for her to consort with, and where she would sink into a still lower position than that from which she had sprung. No, Julia Goodwin, with her vulgar proclivities, would vote Elmsfield the dullest hole in the world, and all its charms would be lost to her. She would never come here to worry him, and re-

vive all the ghosts of the past ; and, as he came to this conclusion, he found the towers and steeples of Elmersbridge just emerging into view, and called his friends' attention to the picturesque site of the town, lying like a jewel at the foot of a wooded hill, as if it had dropped from its lap.

## CHAPTER 1X.

### A ROW IN HART'S ALLEY.

As the four friends were pursuing their way up the High Street, and criticising the buildings on either side, a smart pony-phaeton dashed out of a small side street, and just as Paul Nugent recognised Miss Dashwood, and wondered at her being quite alone, she pulled up her ponies and called to him with most unusual eagerness.

He ran up, and, taking off his hat, asked, 'What is it?' for he knew that something must be the matter, and it flashed across him that some accident had probably happened to her cousin.

'A horrid row in Hart's Alley,' she said breathlessly, 'and Mr Lovel's in the thick of it. One against them all.'

Her lovely lips trembled as she spoke, and her grey eyes were bright with terror as she looked appealingly at Paul.

'There are four of us here, he'll be all right,' he said reassuringly. 'You needn't be in the least alarmed.'

Then, fancying there was no time to be lost, he stepped back and explained the matter to his friends, whilst Maude, with a bend of the head

and a tremulous smile of gratitude, drove off to fetch the police.

Hart's Alley was after the pattern of one of the many slums near Clare Market. A narrow roadway, with the dingiest of tenements on each side, separated by little more than two gutters of filth. Most of the hands who worked for Mr Smith's paper-mill lodged here, and the males found an opportunity of spending their week's wage at the 'Black Monk,' a very low beer-shop at the corner, before their half-starved wives and children could get a sixpence for food or rent. It was a mean, sordid-looking place at the best of times, but now it looked like a third-rate Gehenna. A surging mob occupied the alley about half-way up, babies yelled, women screamed, men fought and swore, whilst on the outskirts hung the Dashwoods' coachman in a state of comical perplexity, having been sent there by his mistress to give Mr Lovel a helping hand, but having too much regard for his livery coat to think of offering the Curate, as it were, more than the tips of his fingers. Paul at first could not make out the cause of the disturbance, though his superior height enabled him to look over the rough heads in front of him.

'Grey, where's Mr Lovel?' he asked eagerly, as soon as he caught sight of the Dashwood livery, which was green, with a slight yellow cord at the edge.

'Can't make out, sir, but they say he's kicked a man out of Mrs Ward's house, and he's been a-punishing of him ever since,' said the coachman, craning his neck to see over a woman's shoulder.

The woman turned round quickly.

'If yer'd got the sperrit of a mouse you

wouldn't stand there a-savin' o' yer precious skin,' with keen contempt in her blue-black eyes, 'and let th' mon who's worth the whole pack o' yer be killed afore your eyes.'

'Only tell me where he is,' said Paul, seizing hold of her shawl.

'See that winder with th' drawn blind?'—pointing with a crooked finger where the crowd was the thickest; 'that's where 'ittle Tom lies dead, and parson's jist agen th' door.'

'Good Heavens, I see—*the brute!*' he exclaimed, in a fierce ejaculation, as he saw Lovel's pale, refined face swaying to and fro, and a broad-shouldered, short-throated ruffian, with a shock head of black hair, using all his strength to oust him from his position by the closed door. Pressing round were a lot of men who were too drunk to understand the rights of the case, and only anxious to add their quota of obscene language and brute force to help on the row. Lovel had nothing in his hand but a broken stick, but no one was able to get through the door so long as he stood there, opposing the slight barrier of his slender but well-knit figure to all the mad insensate wrath raging round him.

'You infernal scoundrel, I'll give you a lesson!' shouted Nugent, as he forced his way through the crowd by sheer muscular strength, his friends following in his train. Such a rage possessed him that he felt as if he could tear Lovel's assailant limb from limb, if he only could get at him. With a mighty shove he sent one man staggering against his neighbour; and then, working with both arms, got only one yard from the Wards' door. Lovel looked at him, and their eyes met,

but the next moment a brutal blow came down on his uncovered head ; he reeled, and would have fallen down on the step, to be trampled under foot by Ward's heavy boots, if Nugent, by a supreme effort, had not sprung forward to catch him. At the same time Landon seized Ward by the collar, and dragged him backwards, whilst Paul, with a fierce oath ground between his teeth, gave him a vicious blow across his bloodshot eyes with his stick. Then there was a general scrimmage, for someone raised a derisive howl at the swells, and made a mad rush at them, in which his comrades joined, as Ferrol said, 'out of pure cussedness;' whilst Mr James Ward lay on his back in the gutter, cursing huskily in an almost inaudible voice, as his prostrate body was unconsciously kicked by friends as well as foes. Just as the police arrived, Paul felt the disputed door open gently behind him, and, looking round, saw a woman standing in the opening with a weary, wasted face.

'Bring 'im in, sir. It's all along o' me he's gotten a broken 'ead,' she said, in a low, flat voice, out of which heartache had taken all tone.

With Montgomery's help, Nugent got Lovel into a room, which was dimly lighted by a tallow candle stuck in a gallipot.

The first object that struck his eyes was a small brown coffin, which occupied the centre of the floor.

'Don't be afeard, sir,' she said, as she saw his involuntary start. 'Its only 'ittle Tom, who niver did a craythur one ha'porth of hurt in all his blessed days, and he's not loikly to begin that sort of game when he's safe in glory.'

As she spoke, she pulled forward a chair, and Lovel was placed in it, with his long legs strag-

gling limply towards the coffin. Then she fetched some water from a jug in the corner, and Nugent dipped his handkerchief in it, and bathed the bruised forehead. Neither he nor Julian Montgomery spoke a word, for they were both so impressed by their surroundings; but Mrs Ward was accustomed to sorrow in all its forms, and death in Hart's Alley seemed more like a delivering angel than the King of Terrors. As she sat on a broken stool, sewing a piece of black ribbon on to a straw bonnet, which had done duty at so many funerals that it had quite worn out its trimmings, she told them how her husband, who was like 'one possessed when he got the drink in 'im, though a dacent kind o' mon when he was sober,' was giving her a thrashing because she had got no firing to boil the kettle, 'when in comes parson, and takes 'im by the two shoulders of 'im and turns 'im out. I'd as lief he'd let him alone, but there now, he meant well, the poor gent. And he didn't know as 'ow one thrashin' more nor less ain't o' much account, and Bill ain't a bad chap as mates go about here, and he'll niver spake till parson again, more's the pity.'

'Was this your only child?' asked Montgomery, nodding his head towards the brown box in which 'little Tom' was lying.

'Ay, sir, last o' nine. Th' world bain't nice enough for the childer in Elmsbridge, so God takes 'em, parson says, an' I'd as lief follow 'em pretty sharp, now Tom's gone.'

Paul looked at her wasted figure with reverent curiosity.

'How do you feel so sure that it's better where they've gone?' he said slowly.

Mrs Ward gave him one quick look of surprise, and then her eyes fell back on her work.

'Stands to reason, in fair play, them as has a hard tussle here to keep body an' soul together 'as th' best o' toimes yonder. That's as certain sure as that I sit here.'

Paul was silent, but the woman's words struck him with amazement. Her faith, shining like a lamp in the midst of Egyptian darkness, seemed to him the strongest anomaly—her words contained the most evident paradox. The God who had placed her in this poverty-stricken room, who had given her a brute for a husband, who had taken her children from her one by one, still was the God of her love and trust, the one star shining through the gloom of the future. If any man had behaved to her after such a cruel, heartless fashion, she would have execrated his name, or appealed to the first powers in her little world for vengeance. But not the smallest trace of such a feeling was to be found in her words. Tom had gone to 'glory,' as she chose to phrase it, and she was ready to follow him; though that meant, according to her ideas, dwelling with a Being who had made her the miserable wretch she was. He looked at Montgomery, who shrugged his shoulders, at if he meant to imply, 'She's a hopeless idiot, not worth discussing.'

And then Lovel revived, and was helped into the fly which Conway had brought for him, Miss Dashwood having called at the Lodge on her way home to tell him what had happened. Charlie came into the room with his fair head uncovered, and a look of unusual solemnity on his young face. Paul watched him as he spoke a few kind



words in a low voice to the heart-broken mother. The hard look went from her face, and tears came pouring down her thin cheeks.

‘He warn’t like other chaps, he warn’t,’ she said, with a sob, ‘an’ he went off with the lady’s flowers in his hand. “Maybe Jesus likes ’em too,” he says, and with that his ’ead falls on my breast, an’ I knew that I’d lost ’im too—my last.’

Paul stole out of the room with a queer sort of feeling in his throat. But before he went, he looked for some safe spot on which to deposit the sovereign which he meant to procure food and firing for the poor mother. It was the only comfort he had to give, and the coffin seemed the only place where there was a clear space to make its presence evident. With a shudder he put the shining bit of gold on the shabby wooden box, which contained the one lost treasure of that miserable home.

Lovel was looking out of the fly-window as he came out.

‘Conway will be here directly,’ said Paul Nugent, and would have passed on, but found the Curate’s slender fingers catching at his coat sleeve.

‘I was waiting to thank you. They tell me you saved my life.’

Their hands met in a cordial grasp, and the two men seemed to be nearer to each other than ever before.

‘I did nothing,’ said Paul simply. ‘That brute was an awkward customer, and you had him all to yourself. I hope he’s safe in quod.’

Lovel drew his brows together as if in pain.

‘I was much to blame,’ he said sadly, ‘but I can’t wait to talk of that now. I must speak to the inspector.’

'Nonsense,' said Paul eagerly; 'go home at once, or you may be laid up for a fortnight.' Lovel shook his head. 'Oh, of course,' in a different tone, 'I've no influence with you. I ought to have asked you to go. But it's madness, the act of an utter lunatic.'

'You are quite right,' said the Curate suddenly. 'Rest will be the best policy. *Would* you ask Conway to go instead, and say what he can? After all, I provoked the fellow. Good evening, and thank you all so much.'

He conjured up a smile in the midst of his aches and pains—a smile which gave a rare beauty to his usually grave face—ere he sank back into the corner of the carriage, with a deep sigh.

'That fellow's the right sort,' said Ferrol, with a grave nod, as the fly drove off, 'but he's born a few centuries after his time. The stake has gone out of fashion, but martyrdom is his only fit apotheosis.'

'Did you hear what Ward said as the bobbies were taking him off? "Lock up that —— parson 'stead o' me. Kick's a feller off his own doorstep. B'lieve he was that drunk he couldn't see t'other from which." Good that, wasn't it?' Landon asked, with a short laugh.

Conway came out just at that moment, so Paul delivered his message, and then they all walked together to the end of the alley. Their footsteps were the only sound in it, for the crowd had melted away directly the police appeared, and a preternatural quiet settled down on the seething passions of fear, revenge, and brutal rage as the various excited units dispersed to their different homes. A row was such a common thing in

Hart's Alley that, in another hour, it would be forgotten by all except the wives who were able to get on with their work because their husbands were in the lock-up.

'Julian,' said Paul, in a low voice, 'that woman would have cut her throat if it had not been for her belief in a life after this.'

'True,' said Montgomery, with a slight smile; 'but if she had cut her throat she would have been out of all her misery, and her amiable husband would not have had anyone to bully.'

Nugent said nothing, but the answer jarred with his then state of mind, and he retired into himself.

## CHAPTER X.

### THE MISS SINGLETONS.

‘DAPHNE, Mr Lovel has been half killed by those dreadful Hart’s Alley people, and Laburnum Lodge has got a tenant,’ exclaimed the elder Miss Singleton, in breathless excitement, with a silver spoon in one hand, and the tea-caddy in the other.

‘Good gracious, Priscilla, it can’t be true!’ and the younger Miss Singleton stopped half way on her road to her chair, unable to proceed any further because of her agitated feelings. ‘He’s such a perfect gentleman. No one would dare to lay a hand on him.’

‘But they did. Short’s boy told Mary Ann, and she says she’s been watching all the morning, and only seen one of them about. It’s a sad thing, but there’s no doubt about the truth of it,’ pouring hot water into the teapot from an old-fashioned silver urn.

‘Dear, dear, dear!’ relapsing into her chair, whilst her two little bemitted hands dropped helplessly into her lap. ‘What a disgraceful thing, what a fearful outrage! I feel as if I could go to Hart’s Alley and thrash them with my own hands. But is he very much hurt?’

'We shall know more when we've been to inquire, but the blinds of the sitting-room are up, so that nothing fatal has happened. Drink your tea, dear,' handing a fragile teacup with a shaky hand; 'we shall both feel better when we've had some breakfast.'

'Oh, Priscilla, think of that poor girl.'

'Hush, Daphne, we must not breathe a word. We may have our hopes about it, we may turn it over in our thoughts, but to mention it would scarcely be delicate. If it ever comes to anything, how thankful we shall be that we never said a word,' buttering a piece of toast with slow precision.

'I suppose there was a disturbance, and Mr Lovel was hurt by mistake. He is so adventurous, I always tremble when I think of it. The dear Rector told me he never ventured there since they sent a brickbat at his hat.'

'No, but, Daphne, just think, how could their souls be saved unless these two good young men risked their bodies?' asked Miss Priscilla, bringing the whole force of her mind, and her pink-beribboned cap, to bear on the subject.

'I don't know, I'm sure,' said Miss Daphne with a plaintive sigh, 'unless the Government think of giving Bibles to the policemen. They might just as well read out a chapter or two whilst they are standing about. It would be such a nice employment for them.'

'My dear Daphne, how can you talk such nonsense! It would be better for Mr Lovel and Mr Conway to have a policeman on either side of them whenever they go to such places,' suggested the practical elder sister.

'They would never consent to that. But, Pris,

dear, after we've inquired at the Lodge, don't you think we might extend our walk to Beechwood?' said Daphne, with a slight blush.

Miss Singleton looked doubtful, but began to consider that nobody need connect their visit with the fact of Mr Lovel's accident, so that, perhaps, after all, they might venture.

'But mind, Daphne, we must ask Miss Wyngate after the poor young man; and on no account say one word to Maude or Nellie, as if we connected them with him in any way. There is nothing to my mind so vulgar and improper as to say that young girls go to church for the sake of the clergy. If they happen to have good looks and a gentlemanly appearance, it's a sort of Providential blessing thrown in, but it doesn't do to let it make any difference to the prayers; and I'm sure that Maude, with her heavenly mind, would not know if it were a bald-headed gentleman or a young one that read them, and she would make no difference in her sweet little Amens.'

'No, that she wouldn't, I'm sure,' rejoined Daphne confidently, 'and I always think the angels in Heaven couldn't have a sweeter voice. I wonder it doesn't convert that Sir Paul only to hear her speak.'

'I wouldn't mention it to a soul, but I've sometimes fancied that it would be a pity if that fine property hadn't a nice mistress to look after it; and you know, Daphne, the worst men change.'

'No, Pris, not on any account!' exclaimed Miss Daphne excitedly. 'I wouldn't have it for a moment. The Church ought to come first, and we won't have one of those dear girls thrown

away on a cold-blooded wretch of an unbeliever, no, that we won't!

'Hush, Daphne, your language is very strong, and Mary Ann might overhear you. Of course Mr Lovel is my favourite, but we sha'n't be consulted, so that we may as well make up our minds to be vexed. Did you hear me say that Laburnum Lodge is let?' changing the subject abruptly, as she rose from her chair and locked the tea-caddy.

'You don't mean it, really? How very surprising! It will be delightful to have a new neighbour,' she answered pleasantly, after smoothing her ruffled feathers.

'That will depend upon the neighbour,' sedately. 'And I don't even know her name. It would be nice to have somebody close at hand whom we could ask in to tea for a friendly chat. That would give us a little more society, with very little expense, but we shall see. Shall we read the psalms and lessons before I order dinner?'

'Yes, and then we sha'n't be disturbed.'

This question and answer were always interchanged on every morning except Sunday, and it never occurred to the two sisters that they might take them both for granted, for when they had once started in a groove they kept to it. When Herbert Lovel first came to be curate at St John's, Elmsfield, they impulsively fixed upon him as the very husband for Maude Dashwood when she was grown up; and then, when Charlie Conway appeared, they paired him off at once with little saucy Nellie, and looked forward with simple-hearted glee to watching the two love affairs progress under their noses. It gave a great interest to their lives, and did no one any harm, for the idea of chaffing

either of the girls about their conquests would have seemed like sacrilege to their old-fashioned, high-bred notions.

When they reached Beechwood, about half-past three, they found Miss Wyngate in sole enjoyment of the drawing-room fire. This was a disappointment to them; for they were always made much of by the two girls, who loved them both for auld acquaintance sake. Miss Wyngate was very glad to see them, because she could break out on her favourite topic without any chance of interruption, so she welcomed them pleasantly, and tried to be very polite.

Miss Singleton, after asking after everybody's health, said, in her soft, purring voice,—

‘I hear that Mr Lovel has been the hero of a very sad accident. I hope it is nothing very serious?’

‘Mr Lovel has met with an accident—that is to say, he foolishly interfered between a man and his wife, and had to take the consequences,’ said Miss Wyngate, in a hard, matter-of-fact tone; ‘but the hero of the affair was Sir Paul Nugent, who nobly went to his rescue, as if he had been the greatest friend he had on earth, and that, you know, is very far from being the case.’

‘Really!’ rejoined Miss Daphne, ‘it is more than I should have expected of him.’

‘Indeed!’ with an offended air. ‘What right had you to think that Sir Paul was a coward?’

‘I assure you, I knew nothing about him,’ hastily, for the gentle little spinster was not at all inclined to spar, unless a special favourite were attacked.

‘No; I don’t suppose you do; but let me tell you that he is one of the most gentlemanly men



about here, with a fund of information on all topics. He has three friends staying with him now, who would be perfect acquisitions at a dinner-party ; but I don't suppose it will occur to Maude to ask them, and they are sure to have them at the Castle.'

'A pity these friends were not with Sir Paul yesterday,' suggested Miss Priscilla, who did not want to discuss Maude with her aggrieved aunt.

'But they were ; and I believe they had much more effect in Hart's Alley than any amount of policemen. I don't approve of visiting all these off-scourings of Elmersbridge. They don't deserve it, and if they were left quite alone, they couldn't be worse ; and it would be much better for my nieces.'

'But I hear they do so much good,' said Miss Daphne softly. 'That dreadful man Ward promised to give up gin, and take to coffee.'

'Was it coffee that made him beat his wife, and give Mr Lovel that knock on his head?' asked Miss Wyngate, with a malicious smile. 'Philanthropy is thrown away on Ward, and the only argument he understands at all is brute force. If his wife were only two inches taller than he, she would be all right. He would not dare to touch her.'

'Then it was Ward?' both sisters exclaimed in chorus. 'Oh, dear, what a dreadful disappointment!'

'Of course it was Ward, the black sheep who will never turn into a white one. The Dissenters tried their hands on him, and gave him up because he set fire to their chapel ; the Salvationists thought they had managed him, and they

marched him up one street and down another with a drum; but something happened to offend him, and he broke the captain's head with the drumstick—so *they* said good-bye to him; and now the Church is trying to get hold of him, with just the same luck. He has half killed Mr Lovel, and when he has wholly killed Mr Conway, sworn at Maude, and frightened Nellie out of her senses, they will let him alone as the others have done, and Mr Ward might die in the gutter before I would stretch a hand to help him out,' Miss Wyngate concluded, with as much self-satisfaction as if she had been guilty of a noble sentiment.

'Oh, but think of his soul,' sighed Miss Priscilla, who had always some pity in her gentle heart, even for the greatest outcast.

Miss Wyngate laughed.

'Do you really think I'm going to trouble myself about it? If he has one, which I almost doubt, for he seems no better than a wild beast, I should think it was in a bad way, and when he's dead, it will be in a worse; but it won't keep me awake, I promise you. I've enough to think of without troubling myself about *Mr Ward's* soul!' and she laughed again.

Just then the door was thrown open, and Sir Paul Nugent was announced. It caused a great flutter in the breasts of the two old ladies, and they both came to the conclusion that they had better go; but Miss Wyngate insisted upon their staying to tea, and declared that it would be a delightful *partie carrée*. Paul, after one disappointed look round the room, sat down and made himself very agreeable. He was at his

best when he felt himself no longer on the defensive ; and with the gentle old ladies he was as different a Paul Nugent as possible to any that Maude Dashwood had ever seen. He was so pleasant and so good-looking, and he waited upon them so courteously, that their prejudices vanished as fast as the bread and butter.

Miss Wyngate would have petted him in open defiance of her brother-in-law and niece, only Paul was not the sort of man to like it. He did not object to her evident appreciation of him, for he was glad to have a single ally in Beechwood Hall, but he would rather have had any other. He had sufficient penetration to see that, under an exterior of kindness, she concealed a considerable amount of malevolence. And, in the midst of her pretty speeches and cordial smiles, he knew that if it had not been for his position in the social world, he would have received but a chilly welcome. He did not trust her ; but there was no reason why he should tell her so, and she never suspected it.

Miss Daphne wondered why he raised his head with such eagerness, when Miss Wyngate asked if it was true that Laburnum Lodge was let to a widow ? Miss Priscilla could not say that it was let to a widow, but she had heard that some lady had taken it. All the brightness went out of Paul's face as he thought of Julia Goodwin ; and a sudden pause followed, which was not broken till Miss Wyngate asked him if he were going to take his friends to the ball at the Castle.

‘Yes, I’ve Lady Mortimer’s orders to that effect. I suppose your whole party are going?’ he asked, with an air of indifference.

'Yes; we shall all be there. No more tea? Really! how abstemious you are! What do you think of Miss Seldon?' eyeing his good-looking face with interest.

'A nice girl, but no beauty,' and then he pulled out his watch, and said that he must be going.

'Girl? I don't call her a girl,' exclaimed Miss Wyngate, who was rather afraid lest Paul might be caught by Lady Mortimer for her sister. 'She is thirty-five if she's a day (which was a wilful exaggeration), and such a terrible blue-stocking that all the men are afraid of her.'

'That is better than knowing too little. The girls of the present day get up the catch-words of some of the sciences, and then think themselves capable of discussing everything under the sun. Good afternoon. Thank you so much for that delightful cup of tea.'

He was already at the door when he heard the Miss Singletons lamenting that they would be too late for something, which he did not catch—unless they walked very fast. He immediately offered them a lift in his dog-cart, which they would probably have refused if Miss Wyngate had not insisted upon their accepting it. She knew their prejudice against the Baronet, and thought it was the greatest joke in the world to pack them off in his cart. When Miss Singleton was comfortably installed on the front seat, and Miss Daphne on the back, Paul asked where they wanted to go.

Miss Priscilla's delicate pink and white face grew absolutely crimson. 'Church,' she said laconically, and was afraid to look at him for ten minutes afterwards. Miss Daphne thought

of nothing but keeping in. She gave a little scream at every corner they whisked round, and was quite breathless when, to her great relief, Paul pulled up his high-stepper at the lych-gate. Getting down was another difficulty which she managed to survive; but as she walked up the pathway to the porch, she resolved that her first prayer on entering the church should be one of thanksgiving for her own and her sister's safety. They were in time, but as she thought it was a miracle that they got there at all without broken necks, she would have preferred a smaller amount of punctuality with less anxiety.

The bell was just tolling in, the Dashwoods' carriage was waiting at the corner; and, as Paul drove off, Charlie Conway came flying out of the Lodge just as the last stroke ceased. What a contrast between this place and Z— in Essex! Here the church seemed to be the centre of life; there nobody ever thought of it at all, except on Sunday. And yet that thick-headed parson, who talked of nothing but the damnatory clauses of his creed, was supposed to preach the same gospel as Lovel, who still kept his charity towards the sinner, even when he had broken his head. Paul drove home thoughtfully, giving one quick glance of interest at Laburnum Lodge, which looked dark, and cold, and empty, and stopping to inquire after Lovel, who was keeping quiet according to the doctor's orders, as Mrs Clowser informed him with great decision, as if she defied him to come in after that. Although there was nothing to make a fuss about, he knew that he had saved Lovel's life. If he had not been in front, Landon might have done as well; but it was horrible to think

what would have happened if they had been one minute later. Ward was too intoxicated to know a man's head from his heels ; and if his hobnailed boots had ever come in contact with the Curate's delicate features, it would have been all over with him. All over with his untiring labours in the parish, all over with his passionate pleadings in the pulpit, all over with his patient struggles against the vice and misery of the world ; his body would have been laid in the grave, and the burial-service would have been read over him, and that would have been the end ! It seemed a terrible thought that a drunkard's brutality could reduce a splendid intellect, an indomitable will, a purified and beautiful nature—to nothingness. The wicked died, and it was a satisfaction to think that they could do no further harm in the world ; but the good ? What pitiless waste it seemed to put an arbitrary end to an existence which was prolific of good to its surroundings ! Why should noble endeavours be crushed before they enjoyed fruition ? Why should kind and philanthropic works be so often brought to a standstill, whilst evil flourished, deriving nourishment from actual corruption ? There never could be an answer to these questions, which have been asked ever since the creation of man, without Mrs Ward's land of consolation and compensation. There is no satisfaction in the 'Now' without the 'Hereafter,' and Paul Nugent felt the bitterness of dissatisfaction in the midst of his present medley of enjoyment and disappointment, because he would not look beyond the first, and turned his back on the other, with the pride of the scientist who knows a great deal, and fancies that he knows all.

Mark Ferrol was cleaning his 'patent ejector' when Paul Nugent reached The Chase. He looked up as the other came into the gun-room, and asked him what luck he had had with the two beauties of Elmsfield.

'I drove the two ladies from the Hall to the church. What do you think of that?' he said, with a smile.

'By Jove, what a fraud! You said they were sure to be out.'

'I said the odds were against their being in. But you needn't be jealous. They had neither ever been in a two-wheeled thing before, and they clung on to the side in the deadliest fright.'

'What muffs! but I say, Paul, never been in a dog-cart before? They must have been chaffing you, old man, and you never found it out.'

'I'd take my oath they weren't. But they were wonderfully game, considering their age.'

'I should think they were just at the right age for pluck,' looking up in surprise.

'Ah, but then, you see, my dear fellow, you've got the Miss Dashwoods in your head, and I had the Miss Singletons in my cart,' said Paul quietly.

'The pair of pious, propriety-loving, peripatetic twins!' exclaimed Ferrol, in amazement. 'No, no, Paul, you've taken me in once, perhaps, but you won't do it again. The Miss Singlepets, or whatever you call them, perched up in your dog-cart would have been quite too much for Robin Hood. He'd have bolted as sure as a—gun,' putting down the Purdy which he had just cleaned up to his own satisfaction.

'You can call there to-morrow and inquire.'

'Thanks, an old maid of a hundred and fifty is

not my idea of the survival of the fittest ; and I don't want anything to do with her.'

'I wish the girls were half as easy to get on with,' rejoined Paul, with a half-comical sigh, as he took his own particular gun and examined it closely. 'I hope the birds won't be as shy as I'm growing.'



## CHAPTER XI.

### A BALL AT THE CASTLE.

IT was always Lady Mortimer's great wish to out-do her neighbours. For instance, when she was proposing to give a ball, she recollected that Mrs So-and-so had a hundred rose trees planted in an artificial bed constructed in the centre of the hall ; and immediately determined to have a thousand lilies not only in the hall, but up the whole staircase, and in the gallery above, so that her guests might feel as if they were walking in a veritable garden, and say, 'How superior this is to Mrs So-and-so's.'

The Castle was built on too magnificent a scale to be readily turned into an imitation of the Health-eries, or some other metropolitan playground, but the Countess exerted her peculiar talents, and the effect was extraordinary, if not altogether lovely. The electric light occurred to her as a most serviceable instrument, and the superb hall was hung with pendant pear-shaped lamps ; whilst the solemn marble columns were draped with festoons of gold-coloured silk, all meeting together in the centre, like the equestrians with their 'banderoles,' in the familiar figure of a circus. The lilies were either white or gold, and everything that could be tied up

was secured with streamers of yellow ribbon. Lady Mortimer wore a dress of tawny brown velvet, with a gold-coloured front, and carried a splendid bouquet of yellow lilies. Miss Seldon looked unusually well in black and gold; and the thirty-five years with which Miss Wyngate had credited her were evidently a fabrication of that lady's active brain. The two sisters stood together just inside the door of the first reception-room, and had little to do but to smile and shake hands whilst the guests poured in in one continuous stream. As soon as Sir Paul Nugent and his friends arrived, however, Miss Seldon discontinued her automatic performance, and forgot all about her duties as sister of the hostess, whilst she listened to one alone amongst the concourse of less interesting units. Paul leant against the wall, his dark, well-shaped head resting against a gold embossed panel, his large eyes with unusual eagerness watching every girl that came through the doorway. He did not know that his presence made all the difference in the world to the woman beside him, or that the remarks he dropped so carelessly were gathered up as if they were served with the finest Attic salt.

'Is this what is called an *omnium gatherum*?' he inquired, as a remarkable-looking female in green satin and ermine passed by, with an anxious look in her eyes, as if asking everybody to admire her best frock.

'Yes, Lucilla hates it, but Mortimer is going to stand for the county council. Now you know why the dear old hall looks like South Kensington gone mad,' with a deprecatory glance that was lost upon him.

'We owe more to the county council than I imagined,' he said, with a slight smile; 'but if the Gold King, General South, were here, he would be sure to take the decorations as a compliment to himself. Such is human vanity.'

'He *is* here, but Lucilla never thought of it,' exclaimed Miss Seldon, with sparkling eyes. 'She wants him to rebuild Hart's Alley, and all the worst places in Elmersbridge.'

'If Lady Mortimer means to get anything out of him, now's the time. How could a man have the face to refuse anything when all these scarves are waving delicate allusions, and the lilies are standing inuendoes?' He stopped abruptly.

The Beechwood party had just arrived, and Maude Dashwood, looking like one of the white lilies stepped from its row of lovely companions, was standing close by him. Very quietly he greeted her, and said some platitude about the crowd; but he was conscious through every pulse in his body that her manner was more gracious, her smile sweeter than ever she had favoured him with before. And yet, although he could not help expanding under the genial influences, he was bitterly aware that he knew the cause of it. If he had not chanced to be of service to that fellow Lovel, Miss Dashwood would have treated him with the self-same coldness as before, he told himself angrily; and yet he asked her for the next waltz, and led her off with a feeling of triumph as the band struck up '*Ma Chérie*.'

Maude was very particular as to her partners, but she could find no fault with Paul, for his step suited hers exactly, and their combined action, as they went slowly round the vast room, was the

very poetry of motion. The girl forgot her resolute repugnance, and let herself enjoy her youth in its fulness. She was charming in her serious moods, but still more captivating in her unwonted playfulness. Paul, infected by her gaiety, felt happier than he had been for years, and yielded himself without reservation to the full power of her charm. All bitterness and sternness melted from him, and he felt as young as when he first met Perdita Verschoyle under the elms at Hurlingham. For the first time they seem to meet on equal terms, with all unpleasant barriers thrown down by mutual consent; and each felt a higher appreciation of the other. He would have sworn that he had never thought of her as a narrow-minded bigot; and she quite forgot that she considered him a cold-blooded materialist. When the dance was over they had a quiet talk in a corner of the hall, where there was a low couch framed in lilies and ferns. The scent of the lilies, the softness of the music, the comparative seclusion within touch of a brilliant throng, gave a charm to their position; and, as he sat by her side, his dark eyes quietly feasting on the beauty of her pale, sweet face, the grace of her drooping neck, he felt the magnetic attraction of a kindred spirit added to that other attraction which was purely personal. Before she had finished the ice which he had fetched her, a partner, half wild after a prolonged search in every spot but the right one, came and took her away; but not till Paul had inscribed his name on her programme for another waltz towards the end of the evening.

He did not care much about dancing, so resolved not to seek another partner before it was time for that other waltz with Miss Dashwood. Just as he

had returned to his former position near the doorway, and was watching the animated scene with some interest, Lady Mortimer came up to him and accused him of shocking laziness.

‘You should not make your rooms so lovely, if you don’t mean them to be looked at,’ he said diplomatically.

‘You needn’t stand still the whole evening to enjoy a *coup d’œil*,’ she said remonstratively, at the same time, that it struck her that he looked remarkably well in his present careless, but graceful pose, against the golden background. ‘It is an age of progress, and we must always be moving on.’

‘Would it be progress to desert Lady Mortimer, and move on to the lady in that startling costume, which looks as if it had been borrowed from Nathan’s?’ he asked, with a mischievous smile, as his eyes followed a striking figure with a towering *chevelure*, and a garment of crimson velvet and pale blue satin.

‘The sort of progress that the democrats wish for, which is going backwards as far as you can,’ she answered, with a shrug of her shoulders. ‘But what would you have? My husband has a craze for exertion; the House of Lords and Quarter-Sessions are not enough for him, but he must try a county council as well. Simply to oblige him, I sent out invitations to all the little people who wanted to be considered big, and you see the result.’

‘At this rate, by the time your little rosebud has developed into a full-blown rose, she will be dancing with the young grocer of High Street, Elmersbridge, whilst you go in to supper on the arm of his retired, but not retiring father.’

‘Never!’ she exclaimed energetically. ‘*Après moi le déluge*; but it sha’n’t be as long as I want standing room on *terra firma*. How sweet Miss Dashwood looks to-night,’ she added, as Maude passed, and threw her a fleeting smile. ‘I offered her my bouquet, but she wouldn’t take it; her own she left on her dressing-table. I fancy my lilies would have given her the touch of colour that she wants, but she always goes in for innocence in white.’ Then she caught sight of rather an imposing-looking man, with a tall, erect figure, a good head, fine forehead, and grey moustache. He looked like a man of action, who would probably distinguish himself if he had a wide enough field. ‘There’s the General, I must go after him; I’ve a thousand things to ask him.’

‘Gold is the one thing that a woman thinks she may go after without waiting for it to come to her,’ said Paul, with his cynical smile; and then he pulled out his watch surreptitiously and vanished.

Lady Mortimer wanted to introduce him to the Gold King, but when she turned round he was gone. Then she pounced upon Mr Conway, and, with an eye to business in the midst of pleasure, introduced him as one of the curates of the parish; and launched him, much against his will, into a conversation on the poverty-stricken dwellings in the suburbs of Elmersbridge. The millionaire detected the Countess’s object at once, and rather enjoyed the joke of appearing to fall into the trap, whilst quietly stepping over it. He asked for statistics as to the hours of labour, wages, etc., and discussed the subject in all its length and breadth, carefully concealing the fact that he had to make a speech on the ‘labour question’ the following

week, and he was rather glad to have the data provided for him in a ball-room, where he usually wasted his time.

Charlie Conway was a very bad beggar, and, moreover, objected to worrying strangers about a parish in which they had no concern. It was a relief to him when Nellie Dashwood came up on her partner's arm, gave the latter his *congé*, and held out her hand with her merry smile to the General. Charlie gave her a quizzical look, intended to show that it was 'no go,' but Nellie was not to be daunted. She pursued a very different cue to the others, and talked of Elmersbridge as a place where there was a fine opening for any sort of enterprise ; and then, with a grave face, wondered if anyone would bring forward a bill in Parliament to oblige husbands to give half their wages to their wives, before they were allowed to enter a public-house.

The General was delighted to find that so pretty a girl could be practical, and told her that if she wished to start either a coffee-room or a hospital, she might count upon him for a substantial cheque. She thanked him in her prettiest manner, and wrote down the name of his club on her fan, scarcely waiting for him to go away before she turned round to Conway to claim his applause.

'There, see what I've done for you !' she cried, bubbling over with delight.

'Will it please you to be told that women make much better beggars than men ?'

'Yes ; because, whatever we do, sir, it is good to do well.'

'Then, when you allow me the honour of taking you into supper, mind you make a good one,' and they both laughed, in the exuberance of their glad delight.

‘Have you happened to see Nugent anywhere?’ inquired Mark Ferrol, interrupting the *tête-à-tête* intentionally, for he had come to the conclusion that the younger Miss Dashwood was quite too charming to be thrown away on a parson. ‘He has grown so eccentric since his sojourn in Elmsfield that I get nervous if he is out of sight.’

‘Then I’m afraid your nerves will be severely tried to-night, for it is impossible to keep anyone in view. Besides, if Sir Paul wants to be lost, why not leave him alone?’ she asked, rather pertinently.

‘I shall forget him entirely if you will remember that you owe me this dance,’ he said promptly.

‘I can’t remember a promise I never made; but as my proper partner—’

‘You will dance with “improper me?” I don’t know why you laid such a stress on that adjective, or why you’ve such a bad opinion of me, Miss Dashwood,’ he said, as he put his arm round her small waist and began to waltz.

‘I’ve no opinion of you at all,’ she replied, with a laugh. ‘Ask me when I’ve seen you more than once.’

‘Will you give me an honest answer?’

‘Yes. Honesty is my failing.’

‘You might have called it your strength,’ and then the pace quickened, and breath was wanted for something else than conversation.

Mark Ferrol was enjoying himself immensely and had forgotten ‘copy’ and everything else as soon as he came into contact with a fresh, young girl, who had the gentle refinement of a high-bred nature, unspoilt by the affectations of conventional society. She was a new study for him, and he felt it his duty to make the most of it. When duty



takes the form of a pleasure, then no man is above, or below, yielding to its charms ; and Mark Ferrol gave Nellie so many chances of forming an opinion of him, that he might well have asked his question before the end of the evening.

Landon found a pleasant companion in Miss Seldon, who let him air his views on any subject that he liked, and discussed them with vivacity and without temper. They danced a little and talked a great deal ; but she was not too engrossed to see Paul Nugent re-appear just as the room had begun to clear a little for supper, or to wonder where he had hidden himself so long.

## CHAPTER XII.

‘I WOULD RATHER DIE THAN ROB YOU OF  
AN ILLUSION!’

WHILST pretty cheeks were growing flushed, and flirtations waxing warmer; whilst youth had its fling, and beauty its triumphs, middle age its satisfactions, and old age its consolations; whilst Landon was sharpening his wit in order to cope with Miss Seldon's, and Mark Ferrol was losing his head, if not his heart, under the influence of Nellie Dashwood's bright eyes, Sir Paul Nugent was driving through the fresh night air with a bunch of white roses on the seat beside him. He had started off in obedience to a sudden impulse, but, now that impulse had resulted in action, he began to doubt if he had not been a fool for his pains. Miss Dashwood might very likely regard his officious service as a liberty. He had no right to pose as a special friend—no right to interpret her wishes without asking for her consent; and, although he had been all the way over to Beechwood to fetch them, he gave them to a footman, in a fit of schoolboy shyness, and instructed him to tell Miss Dashwood that they had been sent from the Hall. The flowers had been wrapped up in cotton wool as carefully as if they had been a small speck of humanity, and

the smile which crossed Maude's face as she bent her head to enjoy their unspoilt sweetness fully repaid him for the trouble he had taken. Not for anything would he have spoiled her content by telling her that he had a hand in producing it; and yet he found a secret satisfaction in doing her a service of which she was ignorant.

He crossed the large expanse of parqueted floor, and, bowing low, claimed the promised waltz. Captain Fitzgerald looked as if he would like to kill him, but Maude rose with a smile, saying,—

‘I thought you had gone, Sir Paul.’

‘You might have known that I should not let you off.’

‘Confess that a ball bores you?’

‘Not to-night.’ Then he added quickly, lest it should seem like a fatuous compliment, ‘I’ve been out of society for so long that it seems quite a refreshing novelty.’

Paul flattered himself that he was steadily making way, when Maude consented, as soon as the waltz was over, to step out of the heated ball-room into the refreshing sweetness of the starlit night. He confessed to no further object than conquering her aversion, which had offended his pride and wounded his self-love from the first. He asked no more than ordinary friendship, such as ought to exist between neighbours in the country in order to make the life palatable; and he thought that he was on the road to win it, as she let him talk to her for some delicious minutes under the stars, without exhibiting any of her usual combativeness in her replies.

She was leaning against the balustrade of the

terrace, her eyes roaming thoughtfully over the view before her, trying to pick out its familiar points from the subtle mystery of the night. Here and there a light twinkled like a glow-worm on a bank, which told where the cottage houses of Elmsfield were lying snugly under the shelter of the hill, like birds in their nests. Close by, the grey tower of St John's stood out against the dark foliage behind it, as the light of the church shone out like a lamp that needed no refreshing, through the mental darkness of mediæval ignorance.

Paul turned his back on gardens, hills, and trees, his face towards Maude Dashwood; his voice took a softer tone, his heart felt tender as a child's. Her gentle, gracious womanliness seemed like a new revelation in Nature; and he felt almost afraid to speak lest he might say something to jar on the tenderness of her present mood.

'Pain has its bright side, which people too often forget,' she said thoughtfully, in answer to his last remark, as her eyes wandered to where a vague light in the clouds showed where the gas-lamps of Elmersbridge were illumining the vice and the misery, as well as the comfort and prosperity, of that fast developing town. 'It would be a very prosaic world without it.'

'And yet, if I were going to make a world, I should take the greatest pains to leave it out,' he said slowly. 'Our span is not so very long after all. Why shouldn't we be happy whilst we are here?'

'Because we should grow hard, and cold, and detestable. There would be no room for sympathy, no field for tenderness. Our noblest characteristics would be lost or wasted, and women would break their hearts for want of a mission.'

'I don't see that. Don't you think a woman's friendship would be worth having if she had never cured you of a toothache?'

'Ah! but you would not think a woman's friendship worth having, if you knew you would not have her sympathy when you were ill or in trouble.'

'It would be worth while to be ill in order to get it,' he said, in a low voice. 'It is horribly unpleasant to walk the world with a park-paling always round you.'

She raised her beautiful eyes to his.

'I hope there are very wide gates to all the palings in Elmsfield,' she said gently, struck by the sadness of his tone.

'Oh, yes, wide gates for all the world, except me,' he answered, with an undercurrent of protest and offence under his outward composure. 'As for myself, I always find them locked, and it requires some cheek to climb over them.'

'I am very sorry,' softly, as she realised perhaps for the first time, that a materialist could have feelings just like other people; though he might say with Tyndall that 'emotion, intellect, will, and all their phenomena, were once latent in a fiery cloud.' Wherever they came from, she saw that they had the same effect as her own. 'But, after all, is it our fault?' she asked, as the old feeling of anger rose in her heart. 'Is it possible to make a man your friend when all your noblest aspirations, all your earnest efforts after a higher life, are things for him to scoff at?'

'It's not true, I don't scoff. All I want is for people to be true. If you believe, act up to your belief; but if you have no faith, don't

be a hypocrite and pretend you have,' he broke out, with suppressed excitement, for he felt what he considered the injustice of his treatment, most keenly.

'I agree with you; but oh! Sir Paul,' her voice softening as well as her eyes, 'is it possible to go through life, and not feel that we are all under a guiding hand?'

'How can I say? The whole world of Nature is under the rule of law; but as to who made the law, I cannot tell any more than I can see the germ of life in any organic substance.'

'No, and all you clever people, with your theories of evolution, you have to start without a beginning, and end paradoxically, with an abrupt full stop; whilst we have something to go upon from the very first, something I defy you to take from us,' her eyes flashing defiance.

'I would rather die than rob you of a single illusion,' he said passionately; 'but, pity a man who was born and bred in the region of cold, hard fact! The boys I was with at Eton, the men I saw most of at Oxford, the friends I was thrown with in London,—they had no faith and no religion, and all they knew of God was—that He was unfathomable. My mother died when I was six years old, my father out-darwined Darwin, and was an evolutionist of the school of Büchner and Moleschott—that means an avowed atheist.'

Maude shuddered involuntarily.

'You see there is no hope for me,' he said, after a pause, with a slight shrug of his shoulders.

'I should be sorry to say that.'

'No, but you think it. I hear it in the tone of your voice. To you I am worse than a leper, but you refuse to play the part of a Father Damien.'

'You are mistaken. There is nothing that I wouldn't do.'

The tears rushed to her eyes, her soft voice shook. A strong tide of emotion caught them both; and before they were conscious of what they were doing, they were standing, hand clasped in hand, straining to look into each other's eyes in the twilight.

'You will help me?' he said hoarsely, carried away by the impulse of the moment.

'Oh, God, if I only could!'

She bent her head, and a deep silence fell over them both; a silence which might have been prayer in the one, and self-consecration in the other.

A number of couples came out of the drawing-room windows, bringing with them a gust of frivolity from the outer world. Maude started and stepped back; but Paul quietly drew her hand through his arm and then waited, his heart throbbing wildly to see what she would do. His own mind felt in a chaos, and reason entirely subjugate to feeling. He scarcely knew if he had pledged himself to anything or nothing; but he felt as if he had no will at all, as if wherever Maude Dashwood chose to lead he must needs follow.

The girl herself was confused, and shaken to the very core of her being. She looked round for Captain Fitzgerald, or Charlie Conway, longing for some old friend to come and take her away, that somewhere, in some quiet corner, she might get back her usual composure. But she saw nothing but strange faces round her; and, feeling that she could not cast off Paul and leave herself stranded, she let him take her in silence to the drawing-room. All she hoped was that he would

not speak to her, for she felt as if she could not bear a word.

Fortunately Lord Mortimer met them as they came up the steps into the drawing-room, and insisted upon carrying her off to have some supper. He said that he had been doing his duty all the evening, and now he meant to have some pleasure, and he could wish for nothing better than a ten minutes’ chat with Miss Dashwood. Maude willingly consented, but gave a little shiver as she took his arm.

‘That careless fellow has given you a chill,’ he said angrily.

‘No, it was only somebody or something walking over my grave,’ she answered quietly, and her voice sounded as if she were tired out.



## CHAPTER XIII.

### A MODERN PRODIGAL.

‘WELL, darling, and how did you enjoy yourself?’ asked Nellie, as she came into her cousin’s room, despoiled of her finery, but looking as bright as a bird. The chat after any festivity was a time-honoured institution; and she would as soon have thought of not going to bed at all, as of going to bed without it. For once in her life, Maude was unresponsive; but Nellie chatted away merrily whilst she combed out her bright brown hair. ‘Never saw Fitz in such a temper before. He was a walking thunderstorm.’

‘Didn’t you dance with him?’ trying to rouse herself to some appearance of interest.

‘Nothing to do with me. I talked to him till I felt quite flattened, as if I had been sitting under a steam-hammer,’ with a comical grimace. ‘I told him that he looked more like a soldier than I had ever seen him manage before, because he looked quite ready for slaughter.’

‘Perhaps you chaffed him too much,’ clasping her hands behind her head as she lay on the sofa, the picture of physical repose, whilst the victim of mental unrest.

‘Do you know what upset him?’ pausing, brush in hand, to see the effect of her words. ‘He said that you had been spooning for half-an-hour on

the terrace with that "confounded outsider," and it was time somebody interfered.'

If Nellie could have told how Maude writhed, as if with bodily pain, at Fitzgerald's words, she would have bitten her tongue out rather than repeat them. There was a pause which made her rather nervous, but Maude made a supreme effort, and, taking hold of that part of the speech which hurt her least, she said slowly,—

'Fitz is detestable. An outsider is a snob, and I talked to nobody of that sort, though there were plenty of them about.'

'But, Maude, do you like him?' hesitating, but driven on by overpowering curiosity. Fitz had hinted at all sorts of absurdities, and she was anxious to know if there was one grain of truth in them. Maude put her feet to the ground, rested her elbow on her knee, her cheek on her hand.

'Whether I like him or not,' she said impressively, whilst a fever spot burned on each cheek, 'I never wish to speak to him again.'

'But isn't that too bad?' cried Nellie, opening her eyes. 'They say he saved Mr Lovel's life.'

'I see nothing in that. He had an opportunity of showing his pluck, and he took it. Any man worthy of the name is glad to do that. And now, Nell, go to bed. I'm too tired to do anything but yawn; and that,' with a weary smile, 'is not over polite.'

Nellie felt quenched, and went off in a subdued state of mind, conscious of a vague uneasiness for which she could not account; whilst Maude lay awake from hour to hour wondering what Sir Paul had thought of her conduct. If he were a man of no refined or subtle instinct, he might have mistaken her impulse of pity for something far lower;

and burning blushes scorched her cheeks, whilst her pride felt levelled to the dust. Looking back, it seemed impossible that she should have been carried so completely out of herself by the hope of bringing him into the Church. In that one moment of excitement, when heart spoke to heart, and their spirits seemed to rush together, all had appeared possible. The iron was hot, and she only had to strike it. She had felt like a prophetess fired by holy zeal, capable, if need were, of a miracle; but now her hope, her enthusiasm died away, and a terrible reaction set in.

Was it possible that he mistook her? What if he were thinking it over with a cynical smile? A smile seemed like an outrage, like a blister to a raw wound; and yet it was quite possible. He knew nothing of religious fervour. He might exert his strength, even risk his life to save a man's body, but he would not utter one word to save a man's soul. The soul was nothing to him, so how could he gauge her interest? How could he imagine that she valued it far beyond *The Chase*, the Nugent diamonds, or the balance lying at his banker's? He would not understand, and she could never explain; so he would only set her down amongst the other girls of the neighbourhood, who were willing to condone his opinions for the sake of a Greek profile, and for deep dark eyes which expressed perhaps more than their owner was aware of.

Paul Nugent's mind would have been a satisfaction to her, if she had only been able to see into it. He was as free from personal coxcombry as it was possible for any man to be; and, instead of priding himself on the conquest he had made, he was only supremely grateful to Miss Dashwood

for stooping from her pride of orthodoxy to offer sympathy to one outside the pale. He was not only touched, but bewildered and shaken off his balance. He knew that his heart had throbbed as if it would burst from his breast, and he felt as if the blood were still leaping in his veins. But he could not call back the feeling which had prompted him to say, 'You will help me?' It had been born of the impulse of the moment, and it had gone as completely as the moment itself. He told himself that he was an impressionable fool, but he was not going to change the standpoint of his life, or give up the fruits of years of thought, and literary as well as scientific research, because a lovely girl looked at him with tears in her eyes, and his opinions cast an instant's cloud over her peace. He could not be untrue to his convictions, however cold and unsatisfying they might seem to him at times, and a mind that was saturated with the teachings of Huxley, Tyndall, and Spencer, could not be emasculated sufficiently to stoop to receive any fact as an accepted truth that could not be verified by science.

His friends did not notice his silence as he drove them home, for driving was rather difficult work when the lanes were narrow and dark as Erebus, and might naturally be supposed to engross his attention. As they turned a corner into the high road which ran between the palings of Beechwood and The Chase, they were all very nearly pitched out of the cart, as Robin Hood swerved violently to the left, and then stood stock still, with quivering flanks. Paul threw the reins to Landon, and jumped down.

'Jove, that was a shave!' he exclaimed in

horror. 'A man right across the road, as if death on being run over!'

Ferrol also jumped down, and helped to raise the man up, whilst Paul Nugent lighted a match and held its flickering flame to his face. It was deadly pale, with long lashes lying on wasted cheeks. The features were delicate and refined; a dark moustache drooped over a mouth as pretty and weak as any woman's, soft dark hair hung over a smooth white forehead, with straight brows. It struck Paul as strangely familiar to him, and he looked at him with a puzzled air.

'I can't make out what's the matter with him, or who he is; but I'm certain I've seen him before.'

'Drunk?' asked Landon laconically.

'I don't think so.'

'Expect he is,' said Ferrol. 'Heart going all right; I'd drive him to the nearest pub. It's where he would naturally gravitate to.'

'I shall take him home,' said Paul briefly.

'Don't be rash. He may prove an awkward customer when he wakes,' suggested Landon.

'If you insist upon it, I'll walk on,' said Ferrol, lighting a cigarette. 'I've a thought I want to work out.'

'Hang your confounded cynicism!' exclaimed Paul angrily. 'We don't know if the fellow's dead or alive, and you talk of working out a thought! Here, lend a hand, Julian!'

With Montgomery's assistance, he lifted the slight limp body into the cart; and, taking his own place, drove off in a hurry.

Ferrol looked after the retreating cart with a quiet smile. 'First act of the drama! Wonder if he saw the same likeness that I did. Very down on my poor thought! I'd like to know

what his own is.' Then he thrust his hands into his pocket, and walked on at a good pace. He intended to meditate profoundly, but the events of the evening were still uppermost in his mind, and, instead of dissecting a new system of philosophy, he found himself calculating the charm of a girl's smile, and the depth of her apparent sincerity. His intellect was no longer the prominent part of his being; and his heart told him plainly that it had other functions besides acting as a sort of reservoir to the blood-system of his body. It had the same properties as that of a schoolboy, but Ferrol, engrossed in his ologies, had allowed it to get into an almost fossilised condition. Nellie Dashwood's sweet personality had stirred it into activity, but it was doubtful whether a newly-awakened sentiment would have strength to break the rusty chain of habit.

Whilst Ferrol was working out these most unusual thoughts in the quiet stillness of the grey morning; the rest of the party had reached The Chase, and the stranger had been put to bed.

Seton the butler gave it as his opinion that the gentleman had met with no violence, but had taken a drop too much, and stumbled when he was walking. That would account for the bruise on his head, and also for his comatose state. His clothes were shabby, but looked as if they might have come originally from a good tailor. The small feet and hands, and the refined face, asserted that their owner was a gentleman once, by birth, and possibly by position, but it was evident that he had sunk to the lowest strata of society.

'Ought to be ashamed of himself, sir, that's my opinion,' said the butler, with a disdainful shake of

his head. 'Just the sort to break a mother's heart, and bring shame on an honest name!'

'Hold your tongue,' said Paul sternly, 'he hears you.' Then he sent him out of the room to fetch some brandy and water, and went up to the side of the bed. 'Are you ill? Can I do anything for you?'

The stranger's large grey eyes looked up at him, startled and puzzled.

'Is this Beechwood? I don't know the room.'

A thrill of horror and surprise ran through Paul as the idea, which he had been trying to stifle, sprang into life. It *was* Maude Dashwood that this wretched fellow reminded him of. He was as like her as a man could be to a woman, only with a wide difference; the strength and the elevation of her expression were both wanting, though the sweetness remained in the play of the facile mouth, and in the glance of the eye. Instinctively he knew that he was on the edge of a secret—a secret that she would have kept from him at any cost—and he was afraid of asking a question, lest he should be told it against her will.

'This is The Chase. Were you going to Beechwood? Shall I send them word?'

'What's your name?'

This turning of the tables rather amused him, and he answered shortly,—

'Nugent.'

Again the puzzled look came back to the grey eyes.

'Nugent was an old fellow. I don't remember you.'

'I am his nephew. Sir Thomas is dead.'

'You look a good sort,' boyishly. Then a flush spread over his white cheeks. 'I am Gerald Dashwood.'

'Her brother!' exclaimed Paul, stepping back as if recoiling from the unpleasantness of the thought. 'I never knew she had one.'

'No, they keep it dark. They are not altogether proud of me,' with a mixture of sadness and discontent in his tone, as if he knew the reason was good, and yet he could not help feeling injured. 'You had better call me "Dynevor," my second name. I don't tell everyone who I am—don't want to drag Dashwood in the dirt. But look here, I told *you* because I wanted to send a message to Maude. You understand?'

'Yes, I understand.' Oh! what a gulf of trouble, pain, and bitter humiliation seemed to open before the eyes of his mental vision as he thought of Maude Dashwood. To a girl, high-minded and strong in will and principle, a brother like this wreck before him must be like a poisoned thorn in her side. He was the reason and the cause of that look of trouble in her glorious eyes when they talked of 'cold, pitiless justice.' Why, justice to such men as Gerald Dashwood meant annihilation! There is a weakness which leads to wickedness, as October damp to November fog, and it was written on every line of his face. 'You were going home?' he asked, with a feeling of rising wrath as he pictured the effect of such an addition as this to that home of pride, as well as tenderness—the Squire's only son!

'I don't know,' passing his thin hand over his forehead. 'I wanted to see Maude before I slipped the hooks.'

Paul looked at him, with some compassion struggling to life through his overwhelming disgust.

'Are you ill? Shall I send for a doctor?'



‘Doctor? no; where’s the good? I’m warranted to die.’

‘Here, drink this,’ in a gentler tone, giving him the glass of brandy and water which Seton had brought. ‘And for goodness’ sake eat a sandwich; you’ve run down to nothing.’

Gerald drank feverishly, then he leant his head back on his pillow, and began to eat obediently, but with evident reluctance.

‘That’s my proper level,’ with a smile, as if the power of being amused at his own misfortunes had not yet deserted him. ‘When I get to it everyone will be satisfied, and so shall I.’

Almost before he had finished speaking, he fell asleep, and Paul stood looking down at the beauty and the weakness of the wasted face, with a strange complication of feelings in his heart.

‘Excuse me, sir, but you had better go to bed,’ remarked the butler, in a stage-whisper. ‘I’ll engage not to leave the room till George comes to take my place.’

‘No necessity for you to sit up with him. He’s not ill enough for that.’

‘Lor’, Sir Paul, I wasn’t troubling about his poor carcase,’ he rejoined, with ineffable contempt. ‘I was thinking of all the silver and the valuable nick-nacks about the house. We might find the *gentleman* gone, and half the plate as well.’

Good Heavens! Maude Dashwood’s brother to be watched in case he should steal the spoons! Paul turned on the man as if he would have eaten him.

‘He’s a gentleman, and I know his family.’

‘Oh, I beg your pardon, sir, but you will allow the circumstances was suspicious,’ said Seton, not at all abashed.

## CHAPTER XIV

PROVED BY THE SCALPEL AND THE MICROSCOPE.

GERALD DASHWOOD found lying in the road like a common, drunken tramp, and picked up by Sir Paul Nugent. The news was brought to Maude Dashwood in all its crudeness, and filled her cup of bitterness to overflowing. The mere fact of the doors of his home being shut against him was bad enough, but that he should be installed in the best bedroom of The Chase seemed to make it infinitely worse. Would not Sir Paul be justified in sneering at the Christian who turned his out-cast son from his door, whilst the materialist gave him the shelter that he needed? What would he say of a religion that turned its respectable back on the prodigal?

Gerald was the one blot on the page of her life. He was weak as water, she was strong as the best old wine; he had never done anything that was good, but had done much that was remarkably wrong; her record was almost stainless, and any girl might have been glad to have one half as good; he was a bad son, she was the best of daughters; he was a selfish, exacting brother, she was the most unselfish of sisters; and yet, womanlike, in spite of his faults, or because of them, she loved him, as the

bad men of this world have invariably been loved by the best of women.

His father gave him a liberal allowance, and yet, from the first, he was always preying on her pocket-money ; and, with the splendid folly of misplaced devotion, she would have given him her heart's blood if he had asked for it. His boyish beauty was the joy of her eyes, his happy laugh the delight of her ears ; when the elders shook their heads over his levity, she rejoiced in his continual brightness ; and, when he sinned, she cried her heart out in secret, but left it to others to scold. He was fatally popular at Eton and Christchurch ; at both he did as little work as he could, and threw himself heart and soul into any pleasure that came in his way. Everyone found it hard to be angry with him, for he owned himself wrong with a charming smile, and took every scolding with the outward meekness which springs from inward indifference. His mother died long before the climax came—the climax that turned the kindest of fathers into a stern judge, and nearly broke Maude's heart. They could forgive him for rushing to one race-meeting after another, till his face was better known in the ring than anywhere else ; his bets and gambling debts had been paid again and again, sometimes with remonstrance and just indignation, but always paid, so that, in spite of his rashness and constant impecuniosity, his name had never been posted as a defaulter ; but when he gave that name to a well-known golden-haired beauty, whom he could never have the audacity to introduce to his sister, then his father's wrath burst out like a flame, and the doors of his insulted home were closed against him for ever. Even Maude bent her head in sorrow and

submission, feeling that he had brought dishonour into a stainless family ; but the joy of her life seemed dead. No one mentioned him ; every now and then a whisper reached their ears, and they guessed that he was leading just the same gay, useless, reckless life as ever. There was nothing to be done ; he had cut himself adrift, and the family ship would sail on without him. Not a word nor a sign came to Maude till she received a letter from Gerald, written, to her dismay, from The Chase.

He was ill, and her heart bled for him. With the tenderness of a true woman, she forgot all his sins, and wanted to fly to him, but how could she go to The Chase? Anywhere but there. She put his letter into the Squire's hand, and saw his face darken as he read it. There was a long pause, whilst her heart throbbed fast.

'Will you go to him?' she asked, with her large eyes raised appealingly to his stern face.

'No.'

'Have you nothing to say to him?'

'Nothing.'

'But, father, he may die,' with a sob in her throat.

'He won't do anything so respectable,' with a cynical curl of his lips.

Maude went gently out of the room. It was no use to dash herself against a stone wall ; and she saw that the Squire was inexorable. She penned a loving letter to her brother, her heart yearning over him as a mother's for her child ; and into it she packed all the remainder of that quarter's allowance. She told him that she longed to see him, and begged him to leave The Chase at once. She would come to him if he were really ill ; in the poorest lodgings or a hospital, nothing

should keep her from him. She told him not to masquerade under the name of Dynevor, everyone would know him for a Dashwood, and it would only make people talk. 'But go from this neighbourhood, darling, for it kills me that you should be so near to your own home, and not in it. Oh, if you knew how I loved you still!—Your devoted  
'MAUDE.'

Paul took the letter up to the invalid, and felt the crackle of bank-notes under the cover.

'Preying on his sister, the mean-spirited hound!' he exclaimed indignantly, and went into the room in a fit of disgust.

Gerald Dashwood was lying in bed, propped up by pillows, looking more like a beautiful ghost than a man of flesh and blood.

'Oh, give it me,' he cried, his cheeks flushing with eagerness, a touching smile spreading over his face.

Paul watched his shaky fingers struggling with the thickness of the envelope, and determined not to be mollified. He knew nothing of the fellow's history, but he was certain that he was one of those men who go about the world as veritable blood-suckers, and nothing could exceed his contempt for them.

'Maude is the best sister that ever lived!'

'And what sort of brother are you?' with great severity.

'The worst possible,' with the most engaging humility. 'I tell you that it ought to make a man better only to know her.'

'Then how do you account for yourself?'

'I suppose I was originally cast for a sinner;'

with a shrug of his shoulders, as if he regretted it, but it had never been within his power to help it.

Paul looked at him as if he were a curious study, but he felt that argument was hopeless. Nothing could undo the past, whatever that past might be, and as to the present, nothing could abash Gerald Dashwood. He would have been capable of smiling if a judge had sentenced him to be hanged, and he would certainly have tried a small joke with the Calcraft of the moment when the noose was being adjusted round his neck ; not that he was ever that truly objectionable being, a comic man, only he had a keen sense of humour to begin with, and a firm resolution not to let himself feel uncomfortable to end with. Therefore he got out of all difficult situations with a smile, and took in himself as well as other people.

Paul Nugent, being uneasy as to his health, sent for Dr Hicks, a clever medical man who had lately settled in Elmersbridge. He had passed every examination with flying colours, and won the gold medal ; so his opinion was treated with respect, and his skill was taken for granted. He was a gentlemanly man, with a broad, intellectual forehead, a look of deep thought in his dark eyes, and a grave, reticent manner.

He did not say much to Dashwood himself, but he admitted to Sir Paul that his case was hopeless. One lung was entirely useless, and the other in bad condition. He could never face the cold of another winter. The first shower of snow would be his shroud, and he had better make his preparations for another world, as he would not be much longer in this.

‘I don’t suppose he will be much cut up,’ said

Paul composedly, 'so I think I had better tell him.'

'It will startle him, of course,' and the doctor looked at Nugent in grave surprise.

'Nobody but a coward is afraid of it.'

'I don't agree with you. The bravest man may feel a fear—and ought to feel it. He knows nothing of where he is going. He does not know what will be expected of him—he cannot tell if he would be able to fulfil it.'

'You talk just as if we stepped from one boat into another, instead of into darkness and nothingness,' Paul said, on purpose to induce the doctor to air his views. His friends had gone out shooting without him, and it was now pouring with rain, so that he did not feel inclined to join them, and he was very glad to have a clever man for his companion.

'And so we do,' leaning forward to take a cigar from the case which his host offered him. 'We know nothing of the build of the boat, but we know it will be there.'

'I see you believe in the immortality of the soul; but you know,' with a smile, 'you can never prove it till you die, and then it will be too late to tell any of us.'

'I can, and I will,' exclaimed Dr Hicks, warming with his subject. 'By the scalpel and the microscope I can prove it, without reference to revelation. But first tell me how you account for the unity of consciousness? The latest science tells us that every part of the body changes in the course of the year; but in all this flux of the body your sense of personal identity never alters.'

'No, I can't say anything against that,' drawing

his brows together as if he would find an objection if he could.

'The cause of this sense of personal identity is not to be found in the matter of your organism, or it would exhibit the same changes; therefore the cause must be an immaterial agent, and that agent is the soul,' and the doctor brought his closed fist down on the table as if he were driving a nail home.

'Call the soul the mind, and I'm with you there,' said Nugent quietly. 'Matter is a double-faced unity—physical and mental, and, of course, the mental must be, to a *certain extent*, independent of the other.'

'But if it does not change with the body, it must be entirely independent of it; and, if independent, why shouldn't it outlast it?'

'Because they make one substance between them; so that, if the body dies, the mind is bound to die with it.'

Dr Hicks shook his head.

'Does the light die, because the eye which made use of it is blind? Does sound cease, because the ear which heard it is deaf? If not, why should the soul die because the brain which it worked has lost its power?'

'Because the physical and mental parts of our being are indissolubly linked.'

'But the unity of consciousness proves that they are not. As Hermann Lotze says, "I know that I am I, and not you; and I know this to my very finger tips."'

'I take it that the relation of the soul to the body is that of music to the piano. When the piano is broken up, the music ceases,' said Paul



conclusively, as he leant back in his chair, and wondered what his uncle would think of the discussion if, as a disembodied soul, he were capable of being present in that library.

‘And I maintain, on the contrary, that the relation of the soul to the body is that of the musician to the piano,’ said the doctor, his eyes flashing with the intensity of his conviction. ‘Smash the piano to a thousand fragments, but the musician still lives, ready to play on another instrument, if wanted.’

‘And you undertake to prove this by the microscope?’ Paul asked, after a pause.

‘Well, I can advance a very strong argument in its favour,’ with a smile of conscious power. ‘Did you ever go in for anatomy?’

‘I took it up to a certain extent when I went in for natural science, but I didn’t go very far,’ as his mind flew back to his Oxford days, when he made a brave struggle for success, shot past most of his friends, won the highest university honours, and went back to a home where there was no one to congratulate him.

‘My brother is Professor of Anatomy at —, and possesses one of the finest microscopes in Europe, equal to Lionel Beale’s, which carries a one-fiftieth objective. I have seen bioplasm in movement, seen it weave the subtlest fibres of the human system, and, having seen, I can say with Beale, “Bioplasm prepares for far-off events.” Forecast is not an attribute of matter, but an immaterial agent in living organisms,’ said the doctor impressively. ‘And, again, I’ve studied living tissues of the brain under the microscope. You know the difference between the influential and the automatic arcs?’ Paul nodded assent. ‘You know that the

localisation of functions in the brain is no longer disputed, that the antero-frontal lobes are the seat of the intellect? We tried electrical stimulation on these influential arcs, but it produced no motion. They were dead, inert, because the only agent that can *work this part of the brain is the soul*. I give you that as a fact established by science,' rising hastily after looking at his watch, 'but I suppose you will explain it away if it comes in collision with your favourite theory.'

'I don't know what I shall do with it, till I've thought it over,' said Paul, shaking hands cordially. 'But I've enjoyed our discussion immensely, and I hope we shall soon have another.'

'With all my heart. There's nothing I like better than meeting a man who allows himself time to think. Everybody talks, crowds of people write, but the thinkers are in the smallest minority. But, one word about my patient,' stopping in the doorway. 'If you don't want him on your hands—till the end, you must send him away at once.'

'I can't send him away,' Paul said briefly, as the doctor hurried across the hall, and into his cart, in haste to get to another patient, at whose house he was more than due. 'No, whatever happens, I can't do that,' he repeated to himself, as he returned to the library. 'Whether she will thank me or not, I will do my best for her brother.'

## CHAPTER XV.

### AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

‘I SUPPOSE Miss Dashwood’s first thought would be, send for a priest ; her second, fetch a doctor ; I’ve reversed the proposition,’ Paul reflected, ‘but I’ve half a mind to ask Lovel to come up. Dashwood would like to talk to him ; and they could not accuse me afterwards of influencing his mind in the wrong direction.’

Paul Nugent had never troubled himself much about his neighbours’ opinion of him. He would go so far as to respect their prejudices within certain limits ; for instance, he would not shoot on Sunday, because it would be an outrage to their feelings ; but he never thought it necessary, until he came to The Chase, to rule his conduct by any standard but his own.

Lately he had fallen into the habit of wondering what they would think of this or that at Beechwood, as if he had selected the Dashwoods to be his censors ; and it was with a pleasant sense of their approval, that he started for his walk the following morning. Mark Ferrol accompanied him, but the others had gone off with their guns, intending to have a shot at the rabbits which abounded in swarms at The Chase, and did a good deal of

damage to roots. The keepers were delighted that anyone should help to exterminate them, and the two Londoners enjoyed a tramp over the fern-clad undulations of the park, even if the contents of the bag were not very heavy at the end of it.

It was a pleasant day for a walk, with an autumnal crispness in the air ; and Paul Nugent and Mark Ferrol had plenty of subjects to discuss on their way to Elmsfield. When they neared the village, a tall clerical figure came striding along the road to meet them. Paul recognised Lovel at a glance, and when they came up to him, expressed his surprise at finding him out and about so soon.

‘Yes, I’m off to see Ward,’ he said cheerfully. ‘He is to be let out to-day.’

‘What do you want with him?’

‘I’m going to shake hands,’ with a quiet smile.

‘Shake hands!’ they both exclaimed, in angry surprise, whilst Paul suggested that the fellow needed a thrashing more than anything, and he would gladly undertake the job.

Lovel shook his head.

‘No, he has been sufficiently punished ; now’s the time to reconcile him with himself.’

‘I don’t see that,’ said Paul argumentatively. ‘His moral being would be grovelling in the dust if he were contented with his disgusting self.’

‘But as long as he is at war with himself, he will be at peace with no one else. If I don’t get over him to-day, he will never speak to me again.’

‘I shall be curious to know if your method answers,’ said Ferrol cynically, ‘but with nine men out of ten it would have a disastrous effect. Ward may be that tenth, but it’s stretching charity (he was

going to say 'credulity') to its utmost limits to suppose so.'

'If you want a man to climb a ladder, you must point to the rung above him—not to the one below,' said Lovel quietly. 'But I must push on, or Ward will be there before me.'

'One moment,' said Paul earnestly. 'I've a poor fellow up at my house—'

'Yes, I know,' said Lovel, with a look of pain. 'I was coming up to see him.'

'Do; I was just going to ask you. You wouldn't stop and dine?' throwing out the question with affected carelessness, but watching with keen eyes, half hidden under long lashes, for the slightest sign of hesitation, and ready, in the present sensitive state of his feelings, to take offence at it directly he saw it.

Lovel had an intuitive consciousness of all that depended on his answer, so paused before he gave it. It would have been a treat to him to have some intellectual talk about the chief questions of the day, and a relief to get away from the continual pressure of parish business; but he dared not put off his visit to Gerald Dashwood further than to-morrow, and that evening he had promised to give a lecture in a schoolroom near Hart's Alley. His lectures were very popular, and he was sure that the room would be packed and the audience attentive. No, he could not disappoint them, and after all it might only be a question of personal enjoyment, and he did not mean to be a friend of Sir Paul Nugent's, though he would gladly have been on most intimate terms with all the scum of the earth in the alleys.

'I was coming to-morrow, if that will suit you,'

he said slowly. 'It's very good of you to ask me to stay on; and I needn't say how much I should have liked it, but—'

'Oh! of course you've got an engagement,' with an offended air. 'I quite understand. You won't risk a dinner with *les âmes damnées*. Good morning;' and before Lovel could explain the reality of his engagement, Nugent marched Ferrol off at a pace which would have done credit to the champion-walker of England.

The curate of St John's walked on with a frown of vexation. 'I don't want to annoy Nugent, but he's such a fellow for going off at a tangent. God knows, if I could do him any good, I would stick to him like a leech, but what am I, that I should influence him? A woman might, if she attacked him on the side of the affections.' Ah! what a pang the thought cost him as it took the shape of Maude Dashwood. He would not dwell on it, he cast it resolutely out of his mind, but he had heard enough of what occurred at Lady Mortimer's ball to know that the danger he had feared from the first was no longer imaginary. Conway, who never made mischief or indulged in foolish gossip, had told him that, when she came back to the drawing-room, after a long talk with Nugent on the terrace, she looked as if she were waking from a dream. What had produced the sudden change from her rooted aversion? He could only ascribe it to that unlucky day of the riot in Hart's Alley. Nugent had showed a certain amount of pluck; and, after all, that is the virtue which women most admire, because they have so little of it themselves. But if he had only been given the

choice, he would rather ten thousand times have died that day, than that Nugent should win his way into Miss Dashwood's favour through saving his life. What was death compared to her misery?—for miserable she would be, he knew for a certainty, if she gave her heart to Sir Paul. The text about being yoked with an unbeliever would haunt her night and day. She would find her duty to God on one side, her love to man on the other; and though she was not the woman to hesitate between the two, the choice must ruin her happiness for the sake of her peace.

Lovel knew that to watch the conflict going on would be almost too much for his self-control, and yet he would have to bear it, and make no sign. No man would have a right to interfere, unless, after 'Cast him off,' he could add, 'and come to me.' Even supposing that he wished to give a more mundane turn to the tie which existed between them, he could not do it, for he had bound himself by a vow of celibacy for ten years, and only three of them had already gone by. And perhaps it was better so. The friendship which was possible on a higher level was infinitely precious to him, and in many an hour of worry and disappointment the thought of it had braced, as well as cheered, his failing spirits.

Paul was hurrying along under his sense of injury, when his mood changed as well as his pace at the sight of a slight figure clothed in softest grey, coming out of Miss Singleton's cottage.

'Just slip into the churchyard, and hunt up any amount of curious epitaphs, whilst I speak to Miss Dashwood about her brother,' he said hastily.

Ferrol looked amused, but, having no wish to 'spoil sport,' as he expressed it, turned in under the lych-gate, and sauntered up the trim gravel pathway. The grass was closely cut, the flowers were carefully tended, and every detail showed that the dead were not forgotten by the living. He looked round with a glance of approval, for the place, with its shadowing beeches, looked like a retired nook sacred to peace as well as sorrow.

Maude only hesitated for an instant, when she saw who was coming towards her. Then she forgot herself entirely, and all sense of embarrassment left her in her longing to hear of her brother.

'Oh, Sir Paul, I am so thankful to see you,' she said earnestly, as he held her hand for an instant, and looked down gravely into her lovely, agitated face. He was complete master of himself at the moment, and no one would have guessed that he felt a strange thrill through his senses as she expressed her pleasure at meeting him. 'Tell me about Gerald. How is he? Is he better?'

He looked away from her, and made a hole in the pathway with his stick.

'Dr Hicks saw him this morning, and his report was not very encouraging,' he said slowly.

The colour rushed into her cheeks.

'Don't say that it was very bad. There's no danger?' she asked, with a wild appeal in her eyes, as she fought against the possibility of her fear being true.

'Perhaps, if you saw him, you would judge better,' he said, with an out-rush of sympathy in his eyes and tones, though his words were simple in the extreme.



She clasped her hands tight together.

'Oh, if I only could.'

'Why not? To-morrow morning, for instance, my friends are leaving early to shoot at a distance, the house will be practically empty, and you shall see no one except my housekeeper, Mrs Walters, who shall take you straight to your brother's room.'

She shook her head.

'Not to-morrow. You don't know what difficulties stand in the way.'

'I suppose I'm the worst,' he said, with a touch of bitterness. 'Can't you fancy for a few hours that The Chase belongs to somebody else?'

'I don't want to,' she replied, with one charming upward glance of gratitude that made his pulses quicken. 'You have been kind to him when all turned their backs; you opened your door,' her voice indescribably sad, 'when ours was shut.'

'I should have been the barbarian you took me for, if I hadn't. But you can't tell what a companion he is to me,' his face brightening, though he was saying what seemed to him a gigantic, though perhaps colourless, lie. 'It makes all the difference in the world to know, that there is someone waiting and looking for me in that great lonely barrack.'

'You should have said that when you hadn't any number of friends staying with you,' with a slight smile which stole, like a pale sunbeam, over the sorrow of her face.

'I asked Mr Lovel to come up and see him,' quickly changing the subject.

'That was the best thing you could have done,' with a sudden light in her eyes, which brought a

shadow into his. 'Mr Lovel will tell us exactly how he finds him, and, perhaps, my father will consent to see him. You know what—what Gerald did?' in a low voice.

'Yes, and he has paid for it. An ill-assorted marriage is the greatest curse that a man can bring upon himself.'

Oh, how the past rose up before him, that miserable time of constant jarring, when every day brought its burden of certain humiliation, and uncertain dread. And now, just as the remembrance with its sickening disgust swept over him, and showed itself in the vibrating tones of his voice, a cheerful 'How d'ye do, Sir Paul Nugent?' sent the blood surging back to his heart.

There stood Julia Goodwin before him, with the same expression of simpering affectation, the same frizzled black curls on her shiny forehead, he could have sworn the same pink and brown plaid dress, coarse brown jacket, and outrageous green hat. Mechanically he took off his hat, as she went on to say,—

'I hope you haven't forgotten an old friend amongst new faces,' but the hand which she outstretched remained unnoticed, and he drew himself up till he looked as stiff and unresponsive as a sentinel.

Julia giggled, tossed her head, and jerked out the uncalled-for remark that she begged pardon for interrupting.

Maude gave her one cold look of surprise, and then, opening the gate in the palings, with a slight bow to Sir Paul, disappeared into the park.

When she was out of sight and hearing, Paul turned on Miss Goodwin with a look that showed

that he did not mean to be trifled with. He was exasperated with her for coming to disturb his peace, and he saw no reason why he should not let her know it.

'I never forget an old friend,' he said coldly, 'but I find it the most comfortable plan to ignore a secret enemy. What has brought you to Elmsfield, I'm at a loss to imagine.'

'I suppose I was at liberty to come if I chose?' shrilly.

'Certainly. But you will find yourself without any congenial society.'

'I'm not good enough for the places you visit?'

'That is not for me to say, but I shall not expect to meet you there.'

'There's one place where I sha'n't meet *you*, and that's church,' with a malevolent sneer. 'I can at least pray in peace without your being there to scoff at me.'

'You can, and much good may it do you!' he said, with an unmistakable fierceness; and then he left her, walking on with long, determined strides, though he had not an idea where he was going.

He forgot Mark Ferrol completely. The sight of this odious woman upset him so entirely, that he could think of nothing else. To be always liable to meeting her on the road would be torture to him; but he was thankful to think that her vulgarity was so patent, that she must always be on a lower social level than himself, so that he would not find her waiting for him in any of the drawing-rooms of the neighbourhood.

What had she come for? That puzzled him. Her kind, good-natured brother was dead, so that her only tie with Essex was broken. It could not

be that old infatuation for himself which had brought her, for that had long ago changed into bitter aversion. Then there flashed across him the remembrance of a conversation with Dr Goodwin, in which he had mentioned with regret that his sister had overheard his hasty exclamation, 'I've killed her!' and that it had made such an impression on her shallow mind, that she had cherished a rooted conviction ever since that Paul had murdered his wife. Exceedingly pleasant it would be if she spread the report here in Elmsfield, where there would be no plucky little doctor to refute it! The next time he met Miss Dashwood she might turn from him in horror and loathing; Lovel would offer up his prayers for the sinner, but turn his back on him with colder scorn than ever; even Charlie Conway's cordial friendliness would wither and shrivel up. His life at The Chase would become intolerable to him, and what had he to fall back upon? Only a cold, unsatisfying system of philosophy, which might serve as a fitting exercise for his intellect, but which would never be a support to him in any season of trouble, or save a troubled mind from despair!

## CHAPTER XVI.

### LOVEL ON 'ROBERT ELSMERE.'

'LANDON, I wish you could have a talk with that fellow Hicks,' said Paul, as he leant against the mantelpiece in the dining-room, with a cigar in his mouth. 'It's a curious fact, you know, that electricity has no effect on the antero-frontal lobes of the brain.'

'It's a fact about which I'm not going to bother mine,' replied the barrister, with a short laugh. 'If it could, don't you see what it might lead to? The next murderer might start a new theory for defence, and say, "I'm not responsible for the crime. It was put into my head by means of electricity. Find out the man who applied the stimulus. He's the murderer, and not I. I'm as innocent as a new-born lamb."'

'I'd start a battery to-morrow, and inoculate myself with some new ideas,' exclaimed Ferrol, whilst Montgomery looked up with a dreamy smile. 'Fancy thoughts generated by an electric current whirling through one's addled brain! That would be insanity with a vengeance.'

'Would it be harder to believe than to say with Tyndall that emotion is latent in a cloud, or to assert that we must recast our definitions of Matter

and Force, "as life and *thought* are the flower of both?"' asked Paul thoughtfully.

'Ah! but I think he acknowledged that the connection between mind and matter was unknowable,' suggested Landon.

'But we are always exacting positive proofs from the other side, whilst we leave a very wide margin for conjecture ourselves.'

'Of course we do, because our knowledge is finite, like our lives. If Comte's dream of a Perfected Humanity were to be realised, then perhaps knowledge might be commensurate with the world itself.'

Montgomery leant his elbow on the table, and bent forward.

'I think the only sane thing that Comte ever said, was to discourage research into matters remote from obvious human knowledge as inimical to the Positive faith. As someone said not long ago, "the man who would sacrifice the good of the next generation for the greater good of the next but one, dubs himself a fool," and it is no wonder that Comte ended as he did.'

'I wonder that he did not think that "next but one generation" remote from obvious knowledge. We made a great fuss about him in England, but the only notice they took of him in Paris was to turn him out of the École Polytechnique. I don't know that his doctrines would have done much harm to the youthful mind, for a good Comtist would make a good sort of man.'

'Yes, Ferrol, but not after the right pattern,' Paul remarked, with a decidedly cynical smile. 'If you and I fed the starving, nursed the sick and spent our lives in benefiting our neighbours

do you suppose that the Jesuit or the Anglican priest would have a good word to say for us?’

‘The Anglican might. Think of Lovel going to shake hands with that brute.’

‘Yes, absurdly quixotic. I don’t admire a sentimental charity that glosses over actual sin.’

‘You are hard on the fellow, for he certainly showed no sentimental charity, when he kicked the ruffian out of his house and held the door against him.’

‘Ah! he’s good at holding a door against anyone. I thought it was a province of religion to open a door for everyone to come in; but I find I was mistaken. Shall we adjourn to the smoking-room?’

Landon looked at him meditatively, and, as they were making their way through the hall, he said quietly,—

‘Elmsfield seems to have an unsettling effect upon you; you are losing all your philosophic calm, and ready to become the prey of some effete superstition. I don’t know what will happen to you if you stay here much longer. Come to Scotland and be braced.’

‘Don’t be afraid, I’m man enough to hold to my own opinion when I know it to be founded on fact. But I wish you weren’t going to desert me to-morrow,’ with a sigh. ‘We’ve had a good time together, haven’t we?’

‘Yes, and capital sport,’ they all agreed, and the conversation for the rest of the evening turned on the rival merits of Blanch and Purdy, and the bags they made in the south, and which they were going to boast of when they reached the Northern moors.

Paul Nugent felt rather dull when they had left him ; but even if Gerald Dashwood had not been there to detain him, he had no wish to tack himself on to their party, as they suggested. His mind was disturbed and unquiet, for the questions which he had looked upon as settled once for all he found were still unsolved. The old difficulties, which had satisfied him completely, seemed to require fresh examination ; and the ground which he had gone over so often in his younger days had to be re-trod. He got no help from Gerald Dashwood, who struck him more and more as a grown-up boy, in spite of his dark moustache and the lines on his delicate face. He had a strong dash of contempt for him, when he stopped to dissect his character, or to analyse his life ; but he could not help being drawn to him by a softer feeling, as he lay there in his helplessness, with that smile in his large grey eyes.

'Well, and how have you been getting on ?' Paul asked, as he came into the blue bedroom after a day's shooting at the Castle. He threw himself down into a deep arm-chair in close proximity to the bed, and looked at the invalid with kindly interest.

'Oh, first-class ! You hit upon one book I liked. "London Life" touches up the fellows of the present day, but the girl carries on a little too much !'

'And you didn't care for the other ?' said Nugent, as his eyes rested with a certain amount of scorn on the large-typed, broad-margined novel, which had suited Dashwood's taste so well.

'What, "Robert Elsmere ?" No, thanks,' with an amused look. 'Not my style exactly.'



‘Too serious, eh?’ wondering when a man *would* be serious if not on what might be his death-bed.

‘By a long way. It’s a powder, you know, all the while, though it’s served in a spoonful of raspberry jam.’

‘But powders are good in their way, and—and—’ hesitatingly.

‘You want to stuff one down my throat?’ with a smile. ‘Don’t; it wouldn’t digest.’

‘Oh, here you are, Lovel,’ looking up eagerly as the Curate was shown in. ‘Come and talk “Robert Elsmere” with Nugent. It will be good fun to listen to you.’

Lovel, having shaken hands with Sir Paul, leant over the invalid, with an expression of yearning tenderness on his weary face. He had never quite recovered from Ward’s violence; and it was always a trial to him to see Maude Dashwood’s brother here, or, indeed, anywhere else. He felt so deeply for all the rest of the family, that he could not help being indignant with the man who had brought such trouble on his home. But when he came face to face with the evil-doer, felt the charm of his beauty, and the claim of his helplessness, all his anger melted in deep, heart-felt sorrow.

Paul would have slipped away, but Dashwood, who had a horror of being left alone with a priest, implored him to stay. He ordered tea, because he knew Lovel liked it, and sat down again, having placed his guest in the arm-chair.

‘What do you think of the book?’ after a pause.

‘Clever and interesting, with a fine power of description, but wrong in logic, as well as in doctrine. A book that may do much harm to

those who never think at *all* for themselves, and take everything written in black and white for granted ; but a man would have a very poor pinch of faith who could be misled by it,' leaning back in his chair, as if too tired to sit up.

'I fancied that you Church-people were in a white fury about it,' Paul said, as he poured out the tea, and found the antiquated silver-pot apparently as asthmatic as any old woman. A feminine office never suited him ; but Gerald would have performed it gracefully, for one was a thorough man, and the other half a woman.

'I don't think we need take the trouble. No sugar, thanks. From beginning to end no arguments are advanced to carry conviction. Elsmere knocks under, and throws down his arms, without dealing a single stroke. He may be lovable, but he strikes me as contemptible,' frowning at the plate of bread and butter as if it were the unhappy cleric personified.

'But I thought he went through a tremendous struggle?' looking up in surprise.

'He made fuss enough about it, I'm sure,' said Gerald, with a groan. He had never thought anything worth a struggle in his life. Even his marriage—he would not have fought for—it had come upon him, as it were, and he had given way, as he always would under any sort of pressure. A man like Elsmere was beyond his comprehension ; but he liked to listen to a discussion if it did not affect him personally.

'You can scarcely call it a struggle, when the man throws up the sponge before the first round. He feels the disease of unbelief creeping into his veins, and what does he do to be cured of it? He

does not consult with any of the men who were likely to be pillars of the faith. When everything that he held most dear is slipping from him in the agonies of a dying faith, he goes to those who first began the undermining process. Under these circumstances, the result is inevitable, and Elsmere naturally ceases to be a Christian.'

'And yet he calls his new religion, "The Christian Brotherhood."'

'Yes, and to complete the paradox still carries his New Testament in his pocket!' with an expression of intense disgust on his refined face. 'Could anything be more monstrous?'

'I wondered at that, myself,' said Paul thoughtfully. 'I could not follow the authoress's train of reasoning. If Elsmere degrades his Christ from the Godhead to a manhood not superior to his own, how could he find anything but a sting and a reproach in the book which exalts Him to the highest Heaven? In his place I should have locked it up, and never looked at it again.'

'And you would have acted logically. The sight of the gospels should have been most obnoxious to him, for they breathe the Divinity that he denies in every page. He could not have borne to refer to them, because they would have risen up in judgment against him. The authoress fights for "her own hand," as the Scotch say, and, having given her opponent no weapon, he falls down before her vigorous onslaught; but in real life, Elsmere's scholarship would not be allowed to be latent, or his ignorance so patent. He would have had something to fall back upon. He must have got up Christian Evidences before his ordination, and he ought to have already grappled with all

the difficulties which the Squire presented him with, later on, before he took Holy Orders. There is nothing new in what Wendover says; and most of the questions he started, which seemed like crushing thunderbolts to Elsmere, have already received their answers.'

'You could have met them without flinching?' his eyes resting with a sense of admiration on the priest's face, thin, delicate, but glowing with the fire of an unconquered soul, an undaunted courage.

'I could,' said Lovel, with quiet confidence, 'but to do that I must have read not only the works of negative speculists, but the Christian apologists, from Eusebius downwards, as well. There happens to be a vast field of literature and learning absolutely necessary for a true judgment of the case, which the authoress skips over with an airy bound. Whilst, as to Elsmere himself, there was nothing left for him to do but to die; for, if he had lived, the course he was taking would inevitably have brought him back to Christianity, at least, if not to the Church.'

'You consider Paul, I believe, as one of your intellectual giants. What do you say to her description of him as "strong in poetry, but weak in logic?"' asked Nugent, with a smile.

'She might just as well say that Leonidas was a coward. St Paul was surrounded by the poetical mythology of the Greeks. With the spread of the Greek language, it had covered the East like a flood, but he stood out boldly to stem the tide. When he came to Athens and faced the Areopagites, men of acutest intellect, he conquered poetry by solid fact. He sketched no Olympus for them, but he pointed to their altar of the

"Unknown God," and said, "Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you." These things were not done in a corner, for the fierce light of Greek criticism beat upon them from the onset. It was patent to all who heard him that this was no mythology differing simply in form from their own. St Paul could point to Jerusalem, and defy the world to contradict him. There Jesus Christ had died, and there He had risen. If the resurrection was a fraud, St Paul knew it for a fraud, and preached a lie! Can you believe that a lie could stride triumphant through the centuries—that the empires of the world would bow down before it—that the greatest intellects would give in to it—that it would spread from one end of Europe to the other like a mighty wave? If you believe that, you can believe anything,' Lovel ended abruptly.

Paul felt a strange emotion stirring him to his very heart's depths; but he made a desperate effort to preserve the coolness of his reason, and to remember all the theories which were the sheet anchors of his convictions.

'You must remember that it was the tendency of the age to wish for something new,' he said, with an effort after the cool reasoning which had satisfied him for so many years. 'The heathen were mortally tired of their gods, and the Jews were on the look-out for their Messiah. Given such a tendency, and it was easy to invest the first man who appeared to be superior to his fellows, with divine attributes.'

'I quite agree with you so far,' said Lovel calmly, as he rested his elbow on the arm of his chair, and his head on his hand. 'It would have

been perfectly natural for them to take the first popular hero that turned up, invest him with the purple, and declare war against Rome. But it would have been an impossibility for these bigoted, narrow-minded Jews to invent a *Christ*. Can't you see that He went dead against their dearest prejudices ?'

'Yes, He went against their prejudices, and they, being the most revengeful people under the sun, crucified Him ; for it was infinitely safer to murder, like Barabbas, than to attack the Jewish faith. Christ was grand in His courage, grand in the unselfishness and innocency of His life, but after all, you know,' with a deprecating smile, 'I can't consider Him anything but a failure.'

Lovel's face lit up, his eyes shone as he raised his head eagerly.

'You call that a failure which transformed the world of thought and action ? Man's failure is God's success, and you ought to see this for yourself. Christ died that He might draw all men unto Him, and the conversion of the world was the result.'

'Of course, if you get to believe in the resurrection, nothing can be incredible after that,' said Paul, resting his arm on the mantelpiece.

'My dear fellow, that's begging the question. I believe in the resurrection, of course, but I do not need it to prove the indisputable fact that, whereas the world was once pagan, it became Christian in an astonishingly short space of time. If the religion preached by the twelve apostles had been false, it could not possibly have outlived them. Nero would have stamped it out with the greatest ease, and there would have been no necessity for the persecutions of either Decius or Diocletian. But it lived, and that is an incontrovertible fact. It

opposed virtue to vice, self-restraint to self-indulgence, meekness to pride ; it trod on the prejudices of one nation after another, it was attacked by the scholarship as well as by the ignorance of the time, it lived through the dark ages, and gained new life in the revival of learning, till it became the acknowledged religion of the whole civilised world. From the moment when the soul of Jesus

“Paused at the Body’s wounded Side,  
Bright flashed the cave, and upward rose  
The living Jesus glorified,”

to this present time, the course of Christianity, founded in what you please to call “failure,” has been one long record of glorious success. Voltaire may vainly boast, “I am tired of hearing that it took twelve men to set up Christianity in the world, I will show that it needs but one man to destroy it.” The Church’s answer to this is the same as it has ever been in the darker and more dangerous ages past, “In spite of all this, I shall not die but live, and declare the works of the Lord.” Contradict me if you can!’ said Lovel, turning round with a direct challenge in his eyes.

‘I can’t as to results, for they are self-evident,’ Paul admitted reluctantly, ‘though we might differ—as to causes. You are sure of the Divinity of Christ, sure of the Resurrection, sure of everything, but *I* cry out for proofs.’

‘And they are close to hand,’ said Lovel promptly. ‘The Divinity of Christ is the foundation stone of our Faith ; and *not* its stumbling-block, as Robert Elsmere would have us believe. As Son of God He was able to redeem the world by His death, as Son of God He rose again, and the Church is His living witness to this day. Is

there any other society which has lasted through so many centuries?'

'No, you are desperately long-lived,' and Nugent smiled, 'but I don't know that you can boast of being in a particularly healthy condition at present.'

'I think we can. The disastrous influence of the Puritan movement is passing away, the Church has woken from her temporary stagnation, and her priests were never more zealous in the performance of their mission. Whatever may be said to the contrary, there has been a great revival of faith since the first attacks of German freethought.'

'Strauss made short work with your gospels.'

'At first sight. Yes. But he never frightened me. The Resurrection baffled him, and he was reduced to acknowledging it to be "an enigma." He cannot explain it away, any more than the Jews.'

'The Jews always maintain that the body was stolen.'

'But that was an impossibility. It disappeared, and they were obliged to account for the empty tomb after any fashion that came into their heads. It was a very awkward fact for them to face, and they knew that, if it got abroad, the new doctrines would spread like wildfire. It was impossible for the body to be stolen, because it was guarded by Roman soldiers; but in their first bewilderment and dismay they were glad to seize upon any lie that could assuage the popular tumult and unrest. They had no other alternative, for to believe in the resurrection of the dead Jesus, was to confess to the surging crowds, as well as to their own consciences, that they had slain the long-promised Messiah. And that was too awful a thought for any mortal to bear.' Covering his face with his



hand, as if to shut out a horrible vision which was too much for brain or heart. There was a pause which no one seemed inclined to break, until Lovel pulled out his watch, and hurriedly rose from his seat. He glanced towards the bed, and saw that Gerald had fallen asleep. His expression was perfectly tranquil, but the bedclothes rose and fell with every hard-drawn breath, and his face, now that it was not brightened by his frequent smile, looked sadly worn and thin.

‘Poor fellow, much good I’ve been to him, to-day,’ said the Curate regretfully.

‘His father has been with me half the day shooting up at the Castle, but he never asked after his son,’ Paul remarked, as he conducted his visitor downstairs.

‘No, and yet he is breaking his heart over him. It is a sad business from beginning to end, but they *must* be reconciled before he dies. Good-night,’ shaking hands in the hall, ‘I don’t know what induced me to talk to you as I have to-day. I must have bored you horribly, though you kept awake.’

‘Then come and bore me again,’ said Paul, with sudden cordiality. ‘There is much in that book which I don’t understand, and I should like to have explained.’

Lovel gave him one earnest look, then stepped out into the twilight. Now that the discussion was over, and his enthusiasm gone from him, he felt as if he had done no good; and yet, whilst he was speaking and feeling the truth of every word to the very core of his being, it seemed to him that the truths which were so impossible of contradiction *must* work their way into Nugent’s brain, even against his will.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### A SLANDER.

‘OF course your opinion is worth more than any one else’s,’ said Miss Wyngate acidly, addressing Nellie Dashwood, who was bending over a new racquet, on which she was inscribing her initials. The last rays of the setting sun caught the golden-brown curls, and made them into an aureole for a face that was pretty enough for anything but a saint—for her cheeks were flushed, her blue eyes flashing wrathfully as she looked up.

‘My opinion has nothing to do with it,’ she said impatiently; ‘but if all I’ve heard is true, I’m very sorry that we ever had anything to do with Sir Paul.’

‘My dear Eleanor, let me tell you that you needn’t have more to do with him than you like. If Maude is in the room, he certainly won’t trouble himself about you, if you choose to sulk in a corner,’ and Miss Wyngate looked down her gold-spectacled nose with crushing contempt.

‘And do you think I want to see Maude do the civil to a man who has killed his wife?’

‘Good gracious!’ exclaimed Maude in surprise, as she came into the room with her slow, noiseless step, a basket of flowers in her hand; ‘so there’s a murderer in the neighbourhood?’

Nellie bit her lip, and frowned at her elderly cousin to keep her quiet; but this very signal acted as a spur to Miss Wyngate's tongue.

'Yes, my dear, Sir Paul Nugent,' she said, with an air of triumph, and a defiant look at Nellie; 'the kind-hearted gentleman who has taken in your brother, and been like a guardian angel to him, has somehow offended her highness; and no word's too bad for him.'

Maude let the flowers drop one by one from her basket, as her eyes travelled from her aunt to her cousin.

'Nell, are you mad?' she asked, in a hoarse voice, which she tried in vain to make as clear as usual.

Nell, in a fit of exasperation, flung down her racquet and stood up, her bosom heaving, her colour coming and going. She had no idea of what was going on in her cousin's breast—a storm might be raging behind her outward calm, or her interest might be only that of an acquaintance. The uncertainty made every word seem dangerous, and yet she was forced to speak.

'I only just repeated what I heard,' she said nervously, 'and of course it mayn't be true but Miss Goodwin was at the Singletons', and she was telling us how his poor wife was found dead at his feet; I—I don't know whether he killed her, or—'

'But I do,' Maude broke in impetuously, drawing herself up with the pride and the confidence of a sibyl. 'I know that he is innocent as I am myself; I've only to look in his face to know it.'

'That isn't much evidence,' in a low voice, and with an utter sinking of the heart.

'It is quite enough for me,' she answered haughtily, her heart beating wildly, a strange

tremor in her limbs. 'If you like to listen to the wicked gossip of that vulgar woman, I'm sorry for you, and I pity your taste.'

'I don't—I hate the woman,' exclaimed Nellie passionately; 'she spoilt my visit completely, and I hope she will never be there again.'

Maude took no notice of her, but turned to Miss Wyngate.

'Aunt,' she said quietly, 'will you take me to The Chase to-morrow? I *must* see Gerald; and then we can thank Sir Paul for all his kindness to him.'

'With pleasure, my dear,' exclaimed Miss Wyngate, with extra amiability, because she had just quarrelled with her other relative; 'but have you asked your father's permission?'

'I don't think he can refuse me, but I'll ask him at once. Go I *must*,' she said, with the utmost earnestness; and then, with her empty basket still on her arm, she went out of the room.

Nellie, in dismay, sat down on the floor to pick up the flowers. Those roses and geraniums on the carpet seemed proof positive that her worst fears were realised, and she scarcely had the spirit to retort, whilst Miss Wyngate poured a stream of invective and innuendo over her bowed head. If Maude loved Sir Paul, there was the darkest future before her; for she would never allow herself to marry a man who had no religion. Nellie herself had never disliked him; she knew he was agreeable, and fatally good-looking; any other girl but Maude was almost bound to fall in love with him, who met him often in her daily life. But she, whose religion was the life of her soul, it was incredible that she should love a man who denied her God. It must be a madness which would

pass away ; but oh ! what sorrow and despair lay before her ! Her eyes filled with sympathetic tears, her red lips trembled.

‘I suppose you would have been better pleased if she had thrown herself away on a curate,’ continued Miss Wyngate, breaking into a new line in the hopes of rousing the culprit to answer. ‘We all know why you think it necessary to go to church twice a day.’

Nellie sprang to her feet, with all the flowers, gathered up in her dress.

‘Stop, aunt,’ she cried, with indignant energy ; ‘insult me as much as you like, but don’t insult my religion.’

The next moment she was gone, and Miss Wyngate, having relieved her mind, and cleared the ground, threw herself back in her chair with a sigh of satisfaction. She was very fond of Maude, and it would suit her very well to have her established as mistress of The Chase. Its owner’s heterodox opinions were counterbalanced by a splendid property and a large income ; and she belonged to that extensive class who would be shocked to hear themselves called irreligious, and yet never let religion stand in the way of comfort, self-indulgence, or worldly success. And then, on the other hand, if Sir Paul loved her niece, of course he would become a Christian to please her, and that would satisfy everybody. And as to that audacious little minx Nellie, the sooner she was out of the way the better, only she was to have nothing to do with the Rev. Charles Conway ; for he stuck like a limpet to Elmsfield, and she would always be hanging about the place. By a few judicious remarks, she thought she could stop

that little game before it went too far, for the girl had absurdly sensitive feelings; and her so-called delicacy would be up in arms at the first hint that anybody thought she had been a little forward.

The poor child, whose tenderest feelings she had trampled on with an elephantine hoof, felt that the house was all too small to hold her wrath. She dashed through the hall, catching up her hat and gloves as she went. A basket caught her eye, in which there was a pudding destined for Mrs Ward, but left behind and forgotten when they went out in the carriage earlier in the afternoon. She resolved to take it, partly because it was too late for such an expedition, and a consequent defiance of authority, but partly also because her kind heart felt for the poor woman, and she was anxious to do penance for her own forgetfulness.

It was rather a wild evening for the time of year, and the branches tossed and creaked above her head, but the boisterous wind seemed in sympathy with her passionate mood, and she hurried along with quick, light steps, in her eagerness to get further away from Aunt Tabitha's lashing tongue. She hastened past the church and the Lodge, scarcely venturing to give one timid glance over her shoulder, lest Charlie Conway should be hanging somewhere about. With the exaggeration of agitated youth, she felt that she would rather die than ever speak to him again. She could stand Captain Fitzgerald's good-humoured chaff, but not Miss Wyngate's loathsome suggestion that she came to daily service in order to meet him. It was as unjust as it was uncharitable, because she had always been in the habit of attending the ser-

vices as a child, long before either Mr Lovel or Mr Conway came to the place, and nobody had accused her short-petticoated little self of running after the stately Dr Abbott.

Conscious innocence ought to have been her stay and comfort, but in the depth of her heart she knew that there was a vast amount of pleasure in hearing a certain pleasant voice, even if the greeting were brief and nothing followed ; and in this secret consciousness lay the sting.

Elmersbridge looked picturesque, its grimness hidden in kindly shadows, as her small figure hurried up the steep street, trying to look as if it weren't there. The lamps were lighted, which made it seem very late, and she was certain that the tradesmen whom she passed looked at her in respectful surprise as they touched their hats. A number of working men stood about the corners, just discharged from work, but waiting for a smoke or a drink on the way home. Nellie was not in the least afraid of them ; for hadn't she scolded them and given them tracts like naughty boys ever since she had taken a district in the slums ? The roughest and the coarsest of the lot kept back the ugly oath which hung on the tip of his tongue, as the 'little missie' passed by with a nod and a smile, and felt as if life were all the brighter for a glimpse of her pretty face.

Hart's Alley looked very dark and uninviting, but she plunged into it boldly, and, keeping clear of the reeking gutter, reached Mrs Ward's lodging without misadventure.

The poor woman's face brightened up with a smile, as she saw who her visitor was. As usual, she was hard at work fashioning an extraordinary-

looking garment for a neighbour ; but she stopped, with the ready courtesy of the poor, to find a chair for the lady, and wipe it with her torn apron. Her last ray of brightness had been buried with her Tommy, but she complained of nothing, though her husband was boozing at the ' Black Monk,' and she, with failing health and exhausted energies, had to work for both. Nellie regarded her as a heroine, and felt for her so deeply that she went away with a sad ache in her heart. What could be done with a brute like Ward, who *would* go on in his drunken idleness till his wife worked herself to death, and followed her little ones to a welcome grave? The shadows crept darkly round her as she left the town and all its lights behind her. Now that her rage had cooled down, she grew very uneasy about the time, and walked as fast as she could ; but it was a long way to the Hall, and she rarely traversed it on foot. Tired and breathless, she reached a stile in the palings belonging to The Chase, and stopped abruptly as she remembered the short cut which saved a circuitous round, and which she had often used in Sir Thomas's time. She had fully intended never to use it again ; but the circumstances were desperate, and the noblest people have been known to do the oddest things when reduced to dire extremities. She looked down the road which stretched like an endless line before her dismayed eyes ; and then, with hasty resolution, she jumped on to the first step of the stile, and the next moment she was standing in the park. It was embarrassing to find herself on Sir Paul's property, but nobody should ever know, so she would not be a bit the worse. She scudded along, very like one of the many rabbits she startled on her way, and nearly



shrieked aloud when a head, with wide-spreading antlers, appeared above a clump of bracken. It seemed to her as if the way had altered considerably since she last tried it, for the new owner had cut down several trees which used to be well-known landmarks. How beautiful the old place looked, with the silver-faced moon rising behind its grey towers, and casting long shadows across the dewy grass. So still, so peaceful, with no sound but the distant barking of a dog to break the silence. The wind went down with the sun, and there was only the faintest whisper amongst the branches, which had tossed so wildly, as if moved by a whirlwind of passion, only one short half-hour before. Nellie's mood changed with the weather, and she hurried on, forgetting all her troubles for the moment in her anxiety to get home unseen. Suddenly she was brought to a halt by missing a dead thorn-tree, whose ivy-grown branches had once marked the spot, where the path turned off from amongst the ferns to the solemn darkness under the elms. She looked round in some bewilderment, and in a moment felt herself a poor lone creature—lost in a wilderness of moon-kissed ferns and forbidding trees. Oh, if Maude could only guess her pitiful plight, how quickly she would send someone to bring her safe home. But no one would have an idea where to find her, and they would search for hours before they would think of The Chase. As she stood and hesitated, she thought of Gerald Dashwood, dying behind one of those distant lighted windows; and the awful thought of death fastened upon her like a vulture with black wings. To die in the first years of manhood, after a wasted life—could any fate be worse? To die, and feel as if all those around you would be

glad to say 'good-bye.' She roused herself with an effort, and plunged into the darkness, only to bound back with a spring like a roe, and a stifled scream, for she had come against a black thing which seemed to have risen straight out of the ground.

'Miss Dashwood! you here!' exclaimed a voice in a tone of the greatest amazement, and she knew in a moment that both the voice and the amazement belonged to Charlie Conway, the man whom she most wished to avoid.

'I didn't know that you ever used this cut now,' he said cheerfully; 'but it's a godsend to me when I have to make my way to Elmersbridge from somewhere in your direction. You will let me walk home with you?'

'No, thanks—not for the world,' with unnecessary energy.

'But indeed you must. It is too late for you to be out alone,' turning as if he took her consent for granted, and yet feeling that there was something different to usual in the rigid pose of the little figure, and in the severity of the voice which was usually so gentle.

'I prefer it, thank you. Good evening, Mr Conway. I'm in a hurry.' Without one relenting smile, without one farewell gesture of her little hand, she darted down the path, which was now plainly visible to her, as her eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness.

Conway felt as if he had received a slap in the face, and looked after her retreating figure in offended surprise.

'What had he done to be treated like this?' he asked himself in vain. When last they met—

which was only that morning—they had parted the very best of friends, and nothing had happened since. Oh! it was absurd, on the face of it. She was so unselfish and considerate, probably she was afraid of making him late for his night-school; and the next moment he ran after her, and caught her up just as she was emerging from under the trees into the warm, soft moonlight of a grassy glade.

‘You will let me come with you, won’t you?’ his eyes searching the small pale face for its usually friendly smile.

‘No — I don’t want anybody,’ relapsing into rigidity, as if she were a doll worked by a spring, which on this occasion was loth to act. ‘I told you so—and I can’t wait.’

‘Why should you wait? I’ll go at any pace you like.’

‘No. It’s not that,’ her eyes turned resolutely away from his pleading face. ‘I thought I was sure to meet no one, and I prefer to be alone.’

‘I am sorry I bothered you,’ he said very gravely, and then he raised his hat and vanished even more quickly than he came.

He was rather absent at the night-school that evening, and was down upon a nervous mechanic with whom he was generally extraordinarily patient; but he pulled himself together before the end, and made up most thoroughly for his outburst of impatience. He had a sensitive conscience, and it shocked him to find that he had let a social trouble interfere with one of his clerical duties; and he would never have forgiven himself if he had alienated James Weston, and seen his place empty for the future.

Meanwhile, Miss Eleanor Dashwood plodded

on in a mood of utter dejection ; and before she stumbled, with tired legs, up the steps of the front entrance to the Hall, she had made up her mind that Maude would break her heart over that tiresome Sir Paul, that Mr Conway would never speak to her again, and that she was without exception the most miserable girl under the moon. But when her cousin came with swift steps to meet her in the hall, and, after giving her a passionate hug, scolded her well for having frightened them all so much, she began to feel a little better. She choked back the tears which were ready to flow, kissed Maude with as much fervour as if she had just been saved from death ; and ran upstairs to dress as if her only anxiety were that the soup should not be cold.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### A SACRIFICE.

SIR PAUL NUGENT, gun in hand, returned home after an unsatisfactory morning with the keepers and the dogs. He had missed a woodcock in a most exasperating manner; and had tramped through mud and rain in the hopes of finding another, but without meeting with such a stroke of luck. That miss rankled in his mind as he dropped his gun in the gun-room, and, after scrubbing his shooting-boots on a mat, went into the hall by the back way, and ran upstairs to see his invalid. Dr Hicks had been there the evening before, and given a discouraging report; and Gerald Dashwood had followed it up by having a very bad night. Nugent had been indulging in very sarcastic reflections on the Christian charity of the Dashwood family, exemplified by their leaving a son and brother to die without coming to look after him. He was perfectly sensible of the anomaly presented by his own care of the sick man; but, as he was ready to acknowledge to everyone, it was absolutely forced on him whether he would or no. He was rather startled, as he opened the door of the blue bedroom without knocking, to find himself face to face with Maude Dashwood.

She was dressed in a dark blue serge, which fitted her slight figure to perfection, a sailor-hat with an Oxford ribbon, a lace scarf tied carelessly round the smooth round pillar of her throat ; but he only saw her lovely face, with the tears on her long, dark lashes, the tremble about her lips, and his heart gave a bound, whilst the blood leapt to his forehead.

‘I beg your pardon,’ he stammered in a way that was very unusual with him. ‘I hadn’t the least idea you were here.’

She remembered the carriage at the front door, but yet she did not doubt him, for she had a conviction that he would always be truthful, even if he failed in every other way.

‘I wanted to see you,’ she said simply, ‘to thank you again and again for your kindness to *him*.’

Then she hurriedly motioned to him to come outside, and shut the door behind them. Paul forgot to give one glance towards the bed, where Gerald was lying in a state of utter exhaustion after a trying interview ; for it was fast becoming his habit to think of nobody but Miss Dashwood whenever she happened to be present.

They were quite alone in the old-fashioned gallery, where the portraits of the dead Nugents looked down from antiquated frames upon their only living representative ; and the thought of that loneliness seemed to bewilder his mind. He had not a word to say to her as he waited in the deep archway of the door ; but it was quite enough to stand before her and wait her pleasure.

She raised her eyes slowly to his grave face, with some question about her brother on her parted lips ; but, as they met his, his earnest gaze

seemed to hold them, and in that moment each looked straight, without conventional disguise or concealment, into the other's heart. There was no gainsaying it—no use in equivocation or denial. They knew that they loved—loved with all the power of two strong, passionate natures, whether it were for their ruin or their joy. Something paralysed his tongue; perhaps it was the overpowering consciousness that his love would cast a cloud for ever on her peace, and even in that moment of temptation his noble, unselfish nature asserted itself.

Then a door slammed down below, and broke the spell.

Maude passed her hand over her eyes, as if in bewilderment; and he caught it, and, bending low over it, kissed it passionately. She drew it gently away, with a little shiver, just as she had shivered before in the ball-room at the Castle.

'You are sorry for me, I know,' she said, in a low voice, as she turned away her head, and then moved on towards the top of the broad staircase. There was a little catch in her breath, but she was resolved to master her emotion, and she did—only her cheeks were as white as swan's-down, and her lips as white as her cheeks. 'I—I love him so—and he looks so very bad!'

Paul murmured something hoarsely, and followed her down the stairs, his heart beating with wild, irregular throbs. She went straight on, looking neither to right nor left. The doors were wide open, for, though the weather was growing chilly, Sir Paul thought the hall looked gloomy if they were shut. The carriage was waiting at the foot of the steps. He put her into it, and was going to

shut the door, when she suddenly remembered her aunt, and made a gesture to stop him.

‘Miss Wyngate, sir?’ said the footman, touching his hat.

‘Miss Wyngate?’ he repeated vaguely.

‘Yes—the lady is in the library,’ Seton informed him, and he went to fetch her immediately. Miss Wyngate had been taking an accurate survey of the room, and burst into voluble exclamations of admiration as soon as Sir Paul appeared; but for once in her life she found him uninteresting, as well as obviously uninterested. As she afterwards explained to Nellie: ‘The man seemed in a dream, and Maude looked like a ghost. They bowed solemnly, like two mutes, to one another, and I made up my mind at once that Gerald was dead, or that they had quarrelled desperately. As the poor boy is still alive, I am thankful to say, there’s nothing for it but a quarrel, and what they should quarrel about I’m at a loss to imagine.’

A great catastrophe had happened, and yet only two people were aware of it, and the day seemed to others just like the one before, or the one after. Maude went about her various duties as if in a dream, and sometimes failed to hear the questions that were addressed to her; but her absence of mind was put down to Gerald’s account, as had been the way with every trouble in the past. No one guessed that she had passed through the fire, and she would never be the same girl again. She buried her secret deep down in her heart, as if it were a crime of which she alone were conscious. She was really aghast, as if she had committed ‘the unpardonable sin;’ for what could seem worse to a girl brimful of religious devotion than to give



her love to a man who denied her God? As soon as she could steal out unperceived, she went down to the little church, to which she always took both her joys and her sorrows, and, kneeling in bitterest abasement, laid her love at the foot of the altar. The shadows gathered round her as she knelt, but one ray of light was caught by the brass cross on the altar, and it shone like a lamp in the twilight. The tears ran down her cheeks, her chest heaved with a tempest of sobs, and her trouble seemed almost more than she could bear; but when she rose, after a long interval, she was quite calm—the sacrifice was complete, and the peace which comes with voluntary renunciation settled down on her sad heart, as softly as a dove in its nest.

As she stepped out into the fresh, cool air, she said good-night to the caretaker, who was coming to close the church for the night, and walked on with a firm step. The time for weakness had gone by, and she meant to be strong and brave for the future. It requires some resolution to tear out one page of your life with your own hand, to ignore the blank space for ever, and to go on to the next as if nothing had happened; but Maude Dashwood was fully resolved to do it. There should be no looking back, like Lot's wife. She knew her danger now; she had looked it in the face, and she felt sure that she could trample on it.

There was a light in Elmsfield Lodge, and she could see Herbert Lovel's shadow on the blind, as he sat by the table writing his sermon for the Sunday morning. What would he think of her if he could only guess? He had such a lofty standard for himself, that her weakness would be inconceivable to him, and she knew that it would pain

him as much as if it had been his own. His friendship was left to her, one ray of comfort in the darkening night; and how happy she might be even now, if she could fancy that she wanted nothing more. He had always been her guide in doubt, her counsellor in any difficulty, her sure comforter in any sorrow; and the thought was very sweet to her, that, if she turned her back on the future, which dazzled her, she still had this steady friend to help her through the present. She looked towards the lighted window with a wistful smile; then opened the gate and passed through into the quiet twilight beauty of the park.

When she reached the house, she caught sight of a man's hat on the hall table; and was just meditating an escape to her own room, when Captain Fitzgerald came out of the drawing-room.

'I thought you never were coming,' he said, as he shook hands, and his eager eyes scanned her face. 'You've tired yourself out just because I wasn't here to look after you.'

'It is a tiring day, isn't it?' as she sank into a chair as if she were really exhausted. 'But it is very nice to see you again. I hope you will stay as long as ever you can.'

'I'm warranted to do that,' as he sat on the edge of a handsome carved table in close proximity to her chair, and studied her thoughtfully, whilst he bent a card into all sorts of impossible shapes. 'The fellows are always asking me what is the attraction down in Surrey.'

'Don't say, "Come and see."'

'Not I. I share with too many people as it is.'

'Fitz, have you heard about Gerald?' in a low voice.

His face grew very grave.

‘Yes—bad job.’

‘I want you to do something for me.’

‘You see your slave.’

‘Do speak to my father to-night, and make him see that Gerald *must* come home,’ her voice very low and earnest.

‘Anything to get him out of that fellow’s house,’ with a sudden fierceness.

She bent down to pick up the lace scarf which had fallen from her lap, so that he did not see the look of pain which crossed her face.

‘His wife is dead. There’s nothing to keep him from us.’

‘And there are no brats, thank God.’

‘No, he is all alone ; and this is his home.’

‘Certainly more suited for him than The Chase. I call it confounded impudence—’

‘No, no, Fitz,’ quickly, as she stood up. ‘It was so good of Sir Paul. But it’s time to dress, and my boots are rather heavy, so I’ll go upstairs.’

‘Don’t defend him ; I can’t stand it,’ his eyes blazing. ‘It was infernal cheek. All of a piece with the rest of his behaviour.’

‘It was pure goodness of heart. But don’t talk of it. I—I can’t stand it either,’ very hurriedly, as she thought of her own unreasoning anger ; and then she ran up the stairs, and left him looking after her with questioning eyes.

‘Hanged if I know what to think,’ he muttered to himself, as he pulled his moustache. ‘To do the compassionate to Gerald is just the way to her heart. He *must* and shall be brought here at once.’

## CHAPTER XIX

### FITZGERALD IS DIPLOMATIC.

CAPTAIN FITZGERALD was a man of some common sense as well as tact; and he therefore started the subject of Gerald Dashwood when the Squire had consumed a good dinner, and had just thrown himself into the arm-chair for a comfortable chat over his cigar. He thought it best to take it for granted that he was going to be brought to Beechwood, and only inquire what date had been settled on for the move.

‘I suppose Gerald will be here by the next time I come?’ he said tentatively, as he helped himself to a glass of port.

‘Or back in London. You know what a fellow he always was for making much of his ailments,’ said the Squire, with a frown. ‘If you ask me, I believe this attack of consumption is all fudge—got up for the occasion.’

‘But Maude thinks very badly of him.’

‘Yes, and so does Hicks, Lovel says’ But I know the boy. If he had a scratch on the tip of his finger, he was going to lose his arm; and now that he’s got a trumpety cough, he must needs be in a galloping consumption. He wants to frighten me into taking him back; but we are not a consumptive family, and I’m not in the least alarmed.’

'That woman is dead, and there are no children,' said Fitzgerald slowly.

'I know it, but he married her. If he has wallowed in the gutter for years, do you think he is fit to come and sit in the same room with two pure-minded girls? Put aside Maude; she's older, and his sister, but wouldn't it go against you to see Nellie talking to him, with her great innocent eyes fixed on the face that that woman had kissed, her pure ears drinking in the sort of talk that a vitiated mind is sure to produce? I know it sickens me to think of it,' said Mr Dashwood sternly.

'Oh, if he were able to lounge in the drawing-room, and hang about the girls, I should keep him at his distance till the end of the chapter; but if he's coming to the end of his tether, uncle, don't you think it would be rough on him, and rougher still on Maude, not to let him die in his home?'

The Squire moved uneasily in his chair.

'Dash it all! Do you think I haven't got a heart? What has made you veer round so suddenly? You always agreed with me that there was nothing for it but entire separation. His friends and his ways were not ours; and I hold that a father of a family is bound to stand up for the purity of his home.'

'Of course, but when a man is dying—'

'Look here, Fitz,' said Mr Dashwood, interrupting him quickly, for the subject was intolerably painful to him, 'I'll see Hicks myself, and if he assures me that the boy is dangerously ill, I'll have him home directly after the school-feast. We had better get that over first, for, if he's not up to the mark, the noise and the bustle might be too much for him.'

'A school-feast as late as this?' exclaimed Fitzgerald in surprise. Now that he had gained his point, he was glad of any change of topic. He was certain that the doctor would give a very bad account of Gerald, and that the Squire would keep his word, and it was pleasant to think that Maude would owe it all to himself.

'Yes, we mustn't disappoint the children. Couldn't have it in the summer for some reason or other; their schoolmaster ill, I think. Mortimer always comes, and the whole lot from the Castle, and the girls ask the Miss Singletons, and you had better run down if you can to help the girls. Lovel and Conway will be here, of course, but they generally play cricket with the boys. No more wine? Shall we go into the drawing-room?'

Fitzgerald was all eagerness to tell Maude the good news; and as soon as he reached the other room he drew her into the conservatory. He did not notice that Mr Dashwood failed to follow him. The Squire turned back at the door and returned to his arm-chair, where he sat for some time, thinking of all the sorrows and anxieties which his son had brought on him. Year after year he had tired out patience and worn out affection, till disinheritance, in spite of its outward aspect of harshness, was the truest justice. There seemed to be a gulf of vice between the two men, and the Squire found it hard to bridge it over at a moment's notice. He had taught himself to regard his son with stern displeasure, and the sudden revulsion to compassion and tenderness seemed almost beyond his power. Gerald had deceived him so often, that he felt prepared for another deception; and he could not get it out of his head that, directly

his son was established at Beechwood, he would recover his health in a most surprising manner.

‘He’ll make a fool of me, I’d bet anything. But it can’t be helped. To have that child thinking me an inhuman monster is more than I can stand; and I could swear that she’d be pleased as Punch if I left him Beechwood to sell to the Jews after I’m gone. But he sha’n’t have it,’ bringing his fist down on the table and speaking aloud; ‘no, not unless this worry and bother turns me into a drivelling idiot, and I don’t know what I am up to.’

Having roused himself by the very firmness of his resolution, he got up and joined the others. Maude stole a quiet moment, and went up to him with shining eyes.

‘Dear old dad!’ she said softly, as she stood on tip-toe to kiss his forehead.

He drew her to him with an almost convulsive hug. She was his priceless, peerless possession, a girl who had never cost him one pang of pain, or brought one flush of shame to his cheeks. He did not say a word; but there was a wondrous depth of tenderness in his brave blue eyes as he looked down into her sweet face. If he had ever done any particle of good in his fifty-five years, he felt that in Maude he had his full reward.

## CHAPTER XX.

### CRITICISM CRITICISED.

THE doors of Beechwood were to be opened at last to the disinherited heir, but Gerald Dashwood refused to excite himself about it. He had grown accustomed to being at The Chase; and, in the depths of his heart, instead of longing to see his father, he shrank from the thought of meeting his stern eyes. There had been many unpleasant scenes between them, and although it was his habit to forget anything that was disagreeable, during the long weary hours that he spent in bed he could not escape from a throng of bitter memories, which he knew the first sight of his father would revive most vividly. Lovel often visited him, but in his anxiety to avoid any serious conversation which might have too personal a turn, Gerald generally contrived to start him and Paul Nugent in a discussion on Robert Elsmere. He liked to see the two men growing more and more animated, whilst he listened in a vague sort of way, sometimes drawn into a certain amount of interest, at others letting his thoughts stray to his lost wife and his own wild life.

Paul was puzzling his brain over many deep questions, as he leant back in a lounging-chair with a cigar between his lips.



‘So Rénan actually left the Church because Daniel was retained in the canon, after it was proved to be a forgery?’ he began abruptly.

Lovel took up the challenge at once, as he sat by Gerald’s side.

‘He says he did, but his premiss is false. The forgery has never been proved, and the weight of evidence is against it. Theorists hanker after a Maccabæan writer ; but facts point indisputably to a Babylonian. The book was admitted into the Ketubim, and held in high honour by the Jews themselves.’

‘But the bad Hebrew, how do you account for that? I thought Daniel was supposed to live at a time when the language was at its purest?’

‘The Hebrew was that of the Captivity. On the other hand, no Maccabæan or Palestinian Jew could have used the Greek or Persian words which Daniel introduces, without making mistakes, but they came naturally to a man who was living in Babylon at the time.’

‘Yes, but would the same man write one portion in Hebrew, and the other in Aramaic?’

‘Certainly, because his book was intended for *all* the Jews, and both languages were in vogue at the time. If it had been written as late as Porphyry pretends, the Hebrew would have been useless, because Aramaic had quite superseded it. This is a strong argument in favour of its antiquity, I’ll give you another. The dying Hasmonean chief tried to inspirit his followers by alluding to the miraculous escape of Shadrack, Meshack, and Abednego from the furnace of fire, and of Daniel himself from the den of lions. Which is most natural, that he should refer to the

fictitious narrative of a contemporary, or to the heroic actions of real, once-living men, whose names had been handed down to him from generation to generation? If you wanted to encourage a boy to be brave, would you point to a Wellington, or to the hero of some novel which struck your fancy?’

‘To Wellington, I suppose; but Mattathias—wasn’t that the man’s name?—might think differently,’ Paul said, with a slight smile.

‘He might, but I don’t see why he should. Dashwood, are you sure this doesn’t bore you?’

‘No, go on, defend the den of lions. I’ve believed in it, and trembled over it when I was a kid, and I don’t want to find out that it was a fairy tale.’

‘A fairy tale!’ exclaimed Lovel indignantly. ‘If Daniel’s a fairy tale, I’m one myself, and Elmsfield only exists in fancy. This book that Renan scoffs at was specially selected to be read out, whilst the high priest kept watch on the night of the Atonement. It was admitted into the canon, and, as Derenbourg rightly remarks, “Men do not canonise their contemporaries. Of all the books discovered and collected since the return from Babylon, there remains,” as he says, “no trace of a discussion about Daniel when the Ketubim was finally closed.” That was not till A.D. 164. Moreover, in an old and undisputed Baraita, it is mentioned as being written, or, as we understand it, edited or revised, by the men of the great synagogue, in company with Ezekiel, the twelve prophets, and Esther. Modern criticism generally understands this to be the assembly convoked by Nehemiah, B.C. 400, which stamps this book by the highest authority, and gives it a date long antecedent to the Maccabæan era.’

'Ah, but those old Jewish doctors were very prone to take a thing for granted, and give a big name to any writing without sufficient proof,' Paul objected.

'They excluded Wisdom.'

'Yes, but that was never written in Hebrew.'

'True, but they admitted Daniel into the canon, as I said before, and I can't see why we should suppose that these learned doctors, who, as members of the Great Synagogue, of the Hasmonean College, of the Sanhedrim, or of the Schools of Hillel and Shammai, guided the religion of Israel after the days of Ezra, should lend themselves to the canonisation of a forger. A motive would be absolutely wanting. Why shouldn't they know, as well as Porphyry, who did not start his objections till the latter half of the third century, between A.D. 233 and 302, and was completely refuted by Eusebius of Cæsarea, and St Jerome? The book of Daniel is supported by a host of ancient writers—by its own internal evidence—wonderfully corroborated by the discovery of ancient monuments—quoted by our Lord Himself—alluded to by St Paul—and recognised by the Church for eighteen centuries. I think that is enough for us without going into the question of the Sibylline books.'

'Its Greek translation was rejected after a summary fashion?'

'Yes, because it was wilfully corrupted, and known to be incorrect. In the original there are details of the manners and customs of the Babylonian Court, which are wonderfully true to life, and could not have been imagined by an Alexandrian Jew. They have been confirmed by cuneiform research, as well as by the stones of their

ancient palaces, dug out of the dust of centuries to give the lie to a man like Grätz.'

'And you stand by the miracles as well?'

'Most certainly I do. The fight with wild beasts and the trial by fire were tests that came naturally to the Babylonians; and the triumphant deliverance of Daniel and his three friends must account for the unusual tolerance with which the Jewish captives were treated, and for their subsequent release. The Babylonians were afraid to ill-treat them, when they were backed by a God who could do such wonders.'

'And you believe that those things really happened?' asked Paul wonderingly, and with a smile of conscious superiority.

'Why shouldn't they? Once get it into your head that "natural law is habitual divine action, and miracle is only unusual divine action"—and there is no difficulty. The first prolonged naturally, is the *same* as supernatural.'

'I can't follow you a bit,' said Gerald, with a yawn, 'but I'm much obliged to you for clearing poor old Daniel. I've laughed at most things in my life, but I tell you, I never said a word against the Bible,' flushing slightly.

The Curate turned to him with his most kindly smile.

'No, Gerald, and there is always hope for a man who has not lost his faith. You've come back, and I always said you would.'

'Yes, come back; a fox likes to die in his own earth if he can,' he said, with a touch of bitterness. 'But look here, Lovel,' speaking quickly, 'there's not a bit of the prodigal in me; I've been an infernal bad lot, of course, but I'm only good

now because I've no opportunity of being anything else. So don't go and hold me up as an edifying example, please.'

'Don't be afraid,' said Paul, giving a shake to his pillow. 'When Lovel begins, I'll just mention that you wanted to play poker at two o'clock in the morning.'

'Well, and where's the harm?' A violent fit of coughing interrupted him, and he leant back against the pillow, as if with no strength left, when it was over.

Lovel, with a pained look on his face, handed him the lemonade, whilst Paul threw his cigar into the fender, afraid lest its smoke might have an irritating effect.

'Go on talking, don't mind me,' said Gerald huskily. 'I'm grand at listening.'

'What were we talking about? I quite forget,' said Lovel, rather absently, as they settled down into their former positions.

'You were taking a brief in favour of the supernatural,' Nugent replied, looking amused, 'and nothing seemed too impossible for you to swallow.'

'Excuse me,' said Lovel sternly, 'there are many things impossible for me to swallow. For instance, that any mortal, who was capable of uttering such glorious prophecies of the Messiah, could also be capable of inventing a fable, and handing it down to posterity as a truth! Those who arbitrarily lay it down as a positive certainty that miracles never occurred, and never could occur, let them look round the world and say, if they dare, that no miracle is happening now. "Why," as Lessing says, "the existence of the Church itself surpasses all other miracles," struggling into energetic life in the

midst of a pagan world, and spreading from nation to nation, from age to age, assailed by bitterest hatred and persecution, vilified, traduced, and slandered, attacked by half-hearted doubt and cold-blooded unbelief, and yet to-day, after eighteen centuries, reigning triumphant with all her orders and her Blessed Sacraments intact. In the history of the world, there is no miracle equal to that, and none can ever surpass it.'

There was a deep silence. Lovel passed his hand over his forehead, and got up hurriedly.

'Don't go yet,' said Nugent, rousing himself. 'There are one or two questions I wanted to ask you, and when Dashwood's at Beechwood I shall never see you again.'

Lovel looked at him with sudden quickened interest.

'If I can be of the slightest good to you?' he began doubtfully.

Paul flushed, and rather drew back, as if afraid of committing himself.

'Oh, it was nothing. I don't know why I bother myself about "Robert Elsmere," but any question it unsettles I always wonder how you would answer.'

'Tell me something easy of decision,' said Lovel, with a smile, 'for my time is running short.'

'A slur is thrown upon the Johannine Gospel. Now, I thought that was one of your strongest standpoints?'

'And so it is. It is full of the most beautiful Eucharistic teaching. A message straight from the lips of our Lord, taken down by one who heard the words actually leave the Divine lips. Compare it with the writings of the second century, and you will see an immense difference, wide as that which

divides the apocryphal from the canonical books. So much depends on this gospel, that we should have to make a hard fight for it in any case ; but, happily, the testimony in its favour is strong enough. Polycarp, the martyred Bishop of Smyrna, was a disciple of St John's, and Irenæus was the disciple of Polycarp. He must have known the true facts about the authorship of the gospel, and certainly he would not have referred it to St John without due evidence. Even the Gnostics add their testimony to that of the Church, and appeal to these canonical gospels as, at least, genuine expositions of the Faith. Besides which, as Luthardt tell us, other testimony of the second century, in favour of St John's Gospel, reaches back far beyond Irenæus to the decade following the Apostle's death, a time when the events which he narrated were still fresh in the minds of men, and when any deviation from the truth would have been jealously guarded against by those who kept the Faith. But I mustn't wait any longer ; good-bye, poor old boy,' to Gerald, as he leant over the bed, and looked down with intense compassion on his young, but terribly worn face. 'Good-bye, till we meet again at Beechwood.'

'Do you remember that day when you met me coming back from the races ? I was cleaned out, and you lent me a half sov. to get home,' looking up into his grave face with a boyish smile. 'That half sov. was better than a whole sermon.'

'I don't know, it was easier to give it than to let you go on tramping, when you looked as if another step would be your last ; but if you had had to walk it might have been good for you in other ways,' with a sigh.

‘Was it ever repaid?’ asked Paul abruptly.

‘Lovel knew better than to expect it,’ answered Gerald, with a laugh. ‘He never dunned me, so of course I let it slide. It’s all very well for fellows like you, with a pot of money. I never had enough.’

‘Never enough?—’ began Lovel, but, hastily checking himself, he muttered to Nugent, who was following him out of the room, ‘One can’t argue with a fellow who is liable to break a blood-vessel at any moment. But I’d give anything to have him serious for half-an-hour.’

‘Would it require only thirty minutes to convert the sinner into the saint?’

‘I don’t say that,’ with a frown, and suspecting a sneer, ‘but if the half-hour were employed as I should wish it to be, through the mercy of God, through the Blood of the Blessed Redeemer, his soul might be saved for all Eternity. But why do I say all this to you?’ half angrily. ‘You make me talk, and then you laugh behind my back.’

‘You are mistaken,’ said Nugent, at once hurt and resentful. ‘It would be better if you practised the charity which I presume you preach.’

‘You are right. Trample on me,’ and, with one of his most winning smiles, Lovel looked straight into his haughty face, and then, with a little nod, hurried down the steps into the freshness and peace of the starlit night.

Paul looked up into the blue firmament above his head, and felt as if the universe were scarcely vast enough to hold his thoughts. ‘No God but necessity!’ When Häckel said it, did he realise the utter dreariness of those insolent words which were to take the place of the Christian’s creed? Paul Nugent had once accepted them as truth, but



as he stood on his own doorstep, gazing at the stars, his heart stirred by new emotions, his mind kindled into abnormal activity by the thoughts that passed through it, like clouds before the wind, it struck him for the first time that there was a coldness and unreality about the phrase. Were Lovel and Maude Dashwood and he himself mere puppets forced into life by the pressure of a blind necessity? Was it necessity that gave to the rose its fragrance, to Maude her beauty and grace, to Lovel his fervent faith, and his power of persuasion? Was it a blind unreasoning force that drove him, Paul Nugent, from the cold, careless existence of The Thickets, to the warm, passionate life at Elmsfield, where he felt that the noblest feelings of his nature were brought into play, and roused from their long stagnation? Or was it, as *she* would say, the guiding Hand of a loving Providence? Was it necessity that had forced a faith on the world and urged it onward with resistless force from Judæa to Rome, and to the uttermost parts of the world? Was it necessity that drove the haughty Roman noble into a new brotherhood with the meanest of his serfs, that dyed the sands of the arena with the blood of willing victims, when the way to escape was always open? Was it necessity that urged Jesus of Nazareth to the cross of shame, when His disciples were ready to prepare a throne for Him, and the eager multitude had already offered their homage in the procession of palms, and the cry of 'Hosanna to the Son of David'? Was it necessity that made men choose the narrow life of self-abnegation, when the broad world was all around them with its smiling temptations, and self-

indulgence seemed but another name for common sense? Could necessity explain the existence of the Church when everything that was earthly was bound to perish and decay? With a deep-drawn breath, he stepped back into the hall, picked up his hat, and then went out into the darkness. He had a longing to get away under the shadow of the elms, where he could be alone with the unsolved questions which were crowding upon his brain.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### OUT OF HIS ELEMENT.

IT was a lovely day, when summer, for once in a relenting mood, cast her mantle of warmth over the chilly shoulders of September. Here and there a beech, which had turned golden before its tardier brethren had cared to change a leaf, made it seem as if a stray sunbeam had been forgotten and left behind by the sun. The glory of the roses was over, but the geraniums still formed a brilliant band of colour round the edge of the lawn; and the grass had recovered its verdure after the heat of the summer. Evensong had been said at half-past two, in order that all the children might be present before they streamed up to the Hall in a joyous band, singing as they went. Miss Wyngate sat on the lawn under the old cedar, and anyone who wished to be politely entertained had to take a seat by her side, for Nellie was darting here and there as restless as a firefly, and as busy as any bee; whilst Maude was equally engaged, though after a quieter fashion. She found time to say a few words to Herbert Lovel before the cricket began; and asked him if it would trouble him very much to fetch her brother in their carriage from The Chase the next day.

'My dear father has been so good about it, and I know that it would be painful for him to meet Gerald there,' she said appealingly.

'I shall be delighted to go,' he rejoined heartily. 'In fact, I should have offered, only I took it for granted that you would like to fetch him yourself.'

The next moment he would have given anything to call back the suggestion, for he could not help seeing the cruel blush which dyed her cheeks, and even strayed to the marble whiteness of her forehead. And as he saw it, the colour faded from his own, and the day lost its brightness, for *he knew what it meant*. It seemed to him as if there was a long pause before she answered him, but in reality it was only a minute.

'No, I shall wait to welcome him here,' she said, as she looked across to where the party from the Castle were standing round her aunt. 'I ought to be the happiest girl under the sun, for my highest dreams are coming true; and I shall have Gerald back in his own home.'

'Don't forget that he is very ill,' gravely.

'No, but I'm sure I can nurse him back to health and strength. Oh! I can't be too thankful,' looking up into his anxious face with shining eyes.

'Don't you think we ought to be setting the children to some games? The whole afternoon will be gone before they begin,' said Captain Fitzgerald, bustling up in a state of virtuous remonstrance, simply because his cousin was talking to the Curate instead of to himself.

'Won't you come and join our match?' Lovel called out, as he hurried away, bat in hand.

'No, thanks,—forgotten how to play. I thought I might be of some use to *you*,' turning to Maude.

‘No ; go, and teach the Elmersbridge boys how to field.’

‘Lovel and Conway can see after them ; unless you want to get rid of me?’ with a sharp look from his big brown eyes.

‘My dear Fitz, the children are my sole thought and business to-day. Everyone else is immaterial. There’s Nellie hard at “I’ve got a little dog, and he won’t bite you.” Let us start a rival attraction. How d’ye do, Miss Seldon? So kind of you to come. Do you really wish to be useful?’

‘Nothing I should like better.’

‘Then would you make some of those little boys race for the prizes on that table? My cousin will be delighted to help you. Oh, there are the Miss Singletons ; I must just say one word to them.’

Captain Fitzgerald looked solemnly at Miss Seldon, who was attired in a somewhat startling gown of blue and red, which seemed in accordance with her dark complexion and the brightness of her eyes, but was less to his taste than Maude’s soft grey. He felt sure that his cousin wanted to get rid of him, and so was resolved not to make himself agreeable—with the usual injustice of a cross man. With the air of a martyr, he picked up a saucy little monkey, who, on being wound up, was capable of jumping a foot from the table. The contrast between his injured expression and the monkey’s impudence was too much for Josephine Seldon’s sense of humour.

‘Don’t frown at your ancestor, Captain Fitzgerald,’ she said, with twinkling eyes.

‘I wouldn’t have him at any price,’ looking at it with a face of disgust.

‘No, why not? If it were only alive, instead of

make-believe, it would probably be active, clever, and amusing, which *all* men are not.'

He put it down hastily, as if the creature had bitten him, and, taking up a doll, addressed it gravely: 'If you were alive, which I'm thankful you are not, you might be terribly active, crushingly clever, and you might say sour things with a sugary smile.'

Miss Seldon burst out laughing; and, after this small passage of arms, they both proceeded to business in the most amicable fashion.

The Earl was busy pumping the schoolmaster, who appreciated the honour to such an extent that he grew quite shiny in the forehead. Lady Mortimer moved from group to group, with an eye-glass fixed in her right eye, theorising at her leisure, whenever she could get anyone to listen to her, and fancying herself the busiest of the busy. All was grist that came to her mill; no baby was too small or too unresponsive to have a theory planted upon it, no mother too stupid to serve as audience for a lecture.

Nellie was still gyrating, pocket-handkerchief in hand, round a ring of girls and boys. Herbert Lovel was bowling in the superior style of a former member of the Oxford eleven. Charlie Conway was fielding, with all the scientific work left on his one pair of hands and feet. And Maude was standing in the centre of a circle, with a fair-haired child in her arms, looking like a lovely Madonna, whilst the children, with eager, up-turned faces, were listening to the story which she was telling them in her low, sweet voice.

Suddenly she raised her eyes, and saw Sir Paul Nugent standing outside the circle, listening like

the rest. His presence came upon her like a shock, for her father had forgotten to mention that he had invited him in an unfortunate fit of compunction. The story died away on her lips ; the children, finding that it did not go on, and no longer absorbed by its interest, ran off to join in a scramble for sugar-plums, and Paul was close beside her, his dark eyes fixed upon her face and thrilling her through and through.

‘Let me take the child from you,’ he said ; ‘it is too heavy for you. You are wearing yourself out for these brats.’

‘No,’ her eyes fixed on the little unintelligent face, with its solemn, incomprehensive stare. ‘Why do you want to take it?’

‘Because I should like to relieve you from every burden,’ in a low voice, which made her heart flutter like a bird.

‘Only to pass it on to another!’ struggling so hard against his magnetic influence, that her voice sounded cold and scornful in her efforts to keep it steady. ‘If you took it from me, you would only give it to its mother.’

‘Of course it would be no burden to its mother. Habit reconciles us to everything.’

‘Even to a life at Elmsfield?’ looking down at the child’s dimpled hand.

‘No ; it was *you*,’ very low.

The sentence was incomplete ; but its meaning went straight home, and, with a quick drawn breath, Maude looked round as if for help. When his eyes were upon her she felt so terribly weak ; and he only drew a little closer, watching, with a half smile upon his lips, the delicate pink fluctuating over the whiteness of her cheeks, her bosom heaving with an agita-

tion she was striving to ignore. He knew that she loved him, and every pulse in his body bounded with triumphant joy. But—curse those children! Here they came back again, in a noisy, clamorous troop.

‘Another story, mum.—Oh, ain’t it lovely.—What did the fairy do next?—Please go on.—Here’s Jemima not heard one syllabub.—But do ee now just go on.—We’ve got the sweeties; but we likes the story best.’

It was no use to make a protest. They were so happily oblivious of all claims but their own that everyone yielded to them instinctively. Paul walked away with his nose in the air; but still with a sense of restless, uncertain happiness stirring in his veins. Peals of laughter came from a ring round which Nellie, flushed and breathless, was running to escape from a chubby little boy, with a very dirty handkerchief, who was following in eager pursuit. She gave Paul a nod as he passed; but as soon as she regained her place in the ring she seemed to forget his existence, and kept her pretty rosebud face turned in another direction. He wondered what he had done to offend her, and moved on to where Miss Wyngate was sitting under the cedar with a Miss Singleton on either side. Aunt Tabitha received him with her usual cordiality, but laughingly rebuked him for his laziness, whilst the two old ladies bridled up as they might have done if he had wilfully thrown them out of his dog-cart; and gave him only the tips of their fingers, with the frostiest of smiles. He stood before them, cheerfully defending himself from Miss Wyngate’s reproaches, but all the while wondering what had chilled the warmth of their friendliness.

‘We have made the acquaintance of an old



friend of yours, Sir Paul,' said Miss Daphne frigidly. 'A Miss Goodwin, who says she has known you for many years.'

Paul's face darkened, as it naturally occurred to him that Julia Goodwin's advent might account for Miss Eleanor Dashwood's coolness, as well as that of the elderly spinsters.

'No friend of mine, Miss Singleton; I have but a few, and I don't wish to reckon Miss Goodwin amongst the number.'

'Certainly not,' interposed Miss Wyngate, with her usual decision. 'A most objectionable person, who wants to be kept to her proper level. I would as soon ask Mrs Gregory, the butcher's wife, to dine with me!'

'Only tea and buttered toast,' murmured Miss Singleton, in self-defence. 'And such near neighbours, too. It would have been unkind not to have called.'

'Her brother was a very good fellow,' said Paul quietly, 'but Miss Goodwin was after a different pattern. One was always trying to do as much good as he could, the other—' he shrugged his shoulders, as if he would rather not finish his sentence.

'Miss Goodwin has a very amiable smile,' said Miss Daphne resentfully. She was angry with the Baronet for not humbling himself in the dust at the sound of his accuser's name, instead of standing there, as she said to herself, looking as handsome and unconcerned as possible; whereas, if he had looked troubled and guilty, she would have been the first to champion his innocence, for the gentle little old maid was as paradoxical and illogical as most of her sex.

'Yes, an amiable smile, like that on the face of

the tiger when he finished his ride to Riga.' And then, having mystified Miss Daphne completely, who had never heard the 'nonsense rhyme' which he quoted, he went off, and soon found himself in the midst of an animated group, where nobody gave him either a cold shoulder or a lukewarm smile.

'We've used up all the prizes; and some little wretches declare that they haven't run any races, or had a chance of winning anything,' said Miss Seldon appealingly. 'What can you suggest, Sir Paul?'

'I've plenty of change,' bringing a handful of silver out of his pocket. 'Shall we begin with sixpences?'

'Decidedly not,' Lady Mortimer interposed quickly. 'I have a school-feast at the Castle twice a year, and we never rise above coppers. Do you want to ruin us?'

'No, or I should attack your pounds. Sixpences would take too long. Here, little boy, I don't know your name, would you like to run a race for a sixpence?'

He held out the coin between his finger and thumb, but the red-haired boy whom he addressed grew redder than his hair, and did not stir a step. A number of others, however, ran up, all shouting out that they would run. They planted themselves in a row with right feet forward, and waited eagerly for anybody to give the signal, but the first boy refused to budge an inch.

'Perhaps he's lame,' suggested Miss Seldon.

'No,' said Nellie, who had just come up, and was watching the little scene with a queer expression of defiance. 'He is James Frost, Sir Paul, and he is the best runner in the school.'

'Isn't sixpence enough to tempt him?'

'Oi doant want none o' yer dirrty tanners,' ex-

claimed the boy angrily. 'Turned father and mother oot o' house an' 'ome, an' can't get another for sixpence.'

He elbowed his way through the rest of the boys and walked off, leaving a silence behind him.

'Horrid, ill-tempered boy! An embryo socialist, I'm sure,' commented Lady Mortimer. 'Joe, give the signal.'

'One, two, three!'

There were several false starts, but Paul took no further interest in the racing after he had slipped half-a-dozen coins into Miss Seldon's hand.

'Are you angry with me, Miss Dashwood, for turning out that boy's father?' he asked, as he planted himself straight in front of Nellie, and looked her full in the face.

She wanted to slip away, but, as that was impossible, she stood to her guns with her usual bravery.

'I think you have been rather severe.'

'The man is a drunken lout. As long as he worked for me, he was allowed to have his cottage rent free, now that he refuses to work, I refuse him the cottage. That is my idea of justice,' crossing his arms, with a stern frown.

'Justice won't keep Mrs Frost alive, or put food into the mouths of the children.'

'Am I bound to support Frost's family, because Frost won't support them himself? I shall have my hands full at this rate, for of course all the others would give up work at once, on the same terms,' with a short laugh.

'You needn't laugh at me,' feeling rather small, but determined not to give way. 'You won't laugh much if Mrs Frost dies, and you feel her death on your shoulders.'

‘That is a burden Mr Frost’s shoulders may have to carry, but not mine,’ he said impatiently, with an angry gleam in his eyes. ‘I never intend to pauperise my tenants, and rob them of all self-respect.’

‘Does it teach them self-respect to go to the workhouse?’

‘I don’t know, Miss Dashwood ; but I *do* know that it does not increase any man’s self-respect to take a wage for work that is never done. It ruins it.’

‘Well, I shall see what my dear kind uncle will do for these people,’ turning away with a pout. Paul looked after her dainty little figure with anything but an amiable feeling towards it. He knew that there was justice on his side, and he prided himself on not being lightly turned from his purpose, but it was disagreeable to be thought a monster, even by a pretty little girl who was as unreasonable as kind-hearted youth rarely fails to be.

## CHAPTER XXII.

### TRUE TO HER FAITH.

SIR PAUL NUGENT was out of his element at a school-feast, for he had never established intimate relations between himself and his poorer neighbours. It made him feel awkward not to know the names of the children. He would never have risked a rebuff from Frost's son if he had recognised him ; and he was annoyed to think that he had been made to look like an inhuman landlord by a boy's absurd flourish of independence. He was always ready to give money whenever or wherever it was wanted ; and when he saw the Miss Dashwoods paddling about in the mud and filth of the slums in Elmersbridge, he often wondered why they did not content themselves with sending down a servant with the amount of money they could afford to spend, to be distributed with mathematical regularity. He forgot that an encouraging word will often do far more good than a sum of money, and that the gracious presence of a refined girl like Maude Dashwood might have a more elevating tendency, than a servant with second-hand charity. He thought it, in his haughty fashion, an utter waste of her beauty and grace ; and never guessed that a brute like Ward could be susceptible to her

gentle influence, and that more than once he had slunk away ashamed because he could not meet the glance of her soft grey eyes.

His encounter with Eleanor Dashwood had annoyed him intensely ; and he stalked about for the rest of the afternoon, looking as stern as if he were in the act of superintending an eviction. He handed cakes about at the tea in the servants' hall as if he had been pressed into a service that he detested ; and looked out nervously to see that he offered nothing to a red-haired boy, lest he should turn out to be James Frost, and score off him again by refusing to take anything from his tray.

Maude was never disengaged, and never alone. Captain Fitzgerald mounted guard over her as if she were his special property, and she seemed to submit, more from absence of mind than from personal predilection.

Lord Mortimer and the Squire came and talked to Paul, but they found him different to usual—ready to take everything in a wrong light, prone to be combative on every subject. Mr Dashwood felt awkward with him because of his kindness to his disinherited son, and soon moved off ; but the Earl enjoyed an argument, and drew him into a hot discussion about denominational education. They naturally reasoned from opposite standpoints ; and Paul, in his present aggressive mood, went further than usual in his claim for utter freedom of thought, and uttered such audacious sallies as drove Lord Mortimer to the conclusion that he was a dangerous young fellow, with subversive ideas about everything that he cherished most. It did not improve his opinion of Nugent when he shot off from him, without one word of apology, and made his way

through a passage and a side-door on to the terrace.

He walked fast, looking eagerly into the dusky garden, for he had seen Maude slip out of the room, and he was bent on finding her. She was leaning against the balustrade of the terrace, looking down with wistful eyes over the shadowy gardens—glad to escape for a brief while from the noise and the heat, and the constant care of her cousin. She thought she was quite safe from Paul, for he had seemed to be engrossed in his conversation with the Earl; and she was sure that he had not noticed her disappearance. And yet it would be difficult to know why she was so sure, as she could have given an account of all his movements, though a casual observer would not have seen that she watched him in the least.

‘At last!’ he said, with a deep-drawn breath.

She started violently as she raised her head, and met his eyes.

‘I must go,’ she said breathlessly.

‘Spare me five minutes. You’ve given the whole day to those children,’ with eager remonstrance.

‘They will wonder where I am. I can’t stay,’ trying to pass him as he stood before her.

‘Maude, don’t play with me,’ he said earnestly, and in a moment she knew that her hour of trial had come, and she must face it without flinching.

She grew white till her lovely face looked like a marble cast, and she clasped her hands tightly together. Surely he must hear the beating of her heart, for it seemed to be hammering in her ears.

‘You know that I love you. Will you be my wife?’

A breath, that was almost a sob, and then she

said, with bent head, and eyes that refused to look at him,—

‘No. I wonder that you ask me.’

‘But you knew that I loved you,’ he gasped in consternation. ‘I’m not worthy of you, of course ; but nobody is, and, darling, you will make me better.’

‘No ; don’t speak of it,’ with an expression of acutest pain.

‘But I *must*,’ catching hold of her hands, and clasping them tight. ‘Maude, be true to yourself, and own that you love me.’

‘O God !’ she murmured faintly, as she shook from head to foot.

‘What is it?’ he asked passionately, carried away by his own agitation as the hope of his life seemed slipping from him. ‘Is the bigotry of a narrow creed to stand between us and our happiness for ever?’

It was the worst speech he could have made, for it gave to the girl’s resistance the stimulus it needed, and in a moment he stood before her, not as the pleading lover, but as the unbeliever, the man who denied her God.

She caught her hands away, and drew herself up to her full height. She was calm now, and firm as a rock, and her eyes rested on his, and met the full force of their passionate pleading without wavering.

‘Yes, my faith is more to me than life ; and I would rather die than marry you.’

She saw the brightness die out of his expression, a ghastly whiteness spread over the beauty of his face ; and then, with a slight bend of her head, she walked away, with no outward sign of yielding, though her heart was like a stone.

Paul stamped on the ground, and cursed, whilst his heart felt as if it would burst with rage. Couldn’t



he love her, cherish her, take the tenderest care of her ; couldn't he make a faithful husband, although he was not a Christian ? Was he the sort of man to stand in the way of what she considered to be her religious duties ? Was he so narrow and prejudiced as to object to her saying prayers because he could not join in them ? Was it Christian charity to throw him back on himself, back on all his doubts and difficulties, when her little helping hand might have landed him on the same shore as herself ? There were Julia Goodwin's slanders in the background—that one black lie which stung so venomously because it was half a truth. Julia had told it to those two old maids, they had repeated it to Maude ; and when her faith in him was already staggering, Nellie had come with a long tale about the Frosts, in which he figured as a heartless landlord. His cruelty was evidenced by the eviction. If he did not hesitate to turn out a starving family, why should he stop at murdering his wife ? The two facts, or rather stories, would dove-tail into each other, and the case would be proved against him with quite evidence sufficient for a feminine jury. Sick at heart, he walked back through the park in the utmost bitterness of spirit. When Perdita died, he had made up his mind never to marry again ; but Maude had come to him like a new revelation in womanhood, and he found it impossible to resist her. He had spoken the simple truth when he told her that it was she who had reconciled him to his life at Elmsfield. If it had not been for her, he would have hated it, and struggled against it to the end ; but she had fixed him to the place with a magnetic charm, and he had willingly yielded to her influence. Whenever

she beckoned, he was so ready to follow that it seemed as if his heart had made a traitor of his reason ; and he frowned as he thought of his conversations with Lovel, and remembered that a secret hope had led him on, a hope that one day they might bring them nearer together. He began to doubt himself. What if those doubts which had assailed his intellect were born of the wish to be on the same level with a girl ? He asked himself in a fit of angry self-scorn, if he were reduced so low as to be willing to adopt any form of superstition in order to please a girl's caprice ?

As he walked home, embittered by the vastness of his disappointment, as Maude knelt alone in her room, sobbing her heart out now that the victory was won ; the children were cheering joyously, and the sound of their happy voices was wafted to the quiet bedroom, and far over the silence of the park ; for life is made up of contrasts.

'Good-night, Miss Dashwood,' said Charlie Conway, in a low voice. 'What did I do to offend you the other night ?'

'Nothing—nothing at all,' said Nellie, blushing furiously.

'Then we are just as we were before ?' with a smile, and a forcible grip of her fingers.

'Yes, I hope so,' with a happy laugh, and a shy upward glance, which made Conway's heart feel lighter.

'Eleanor, don't stand out there in the wind,' came in Miss Wyngate's voice from the doorway, like a douche of cold water.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### ‘I HATE NARROWNESS.’

HERBERT LOVEL was struck by the change in Sir Paul Nugent, when he arrived in the Beechwood carriage to fetch Gerald Dashwood. His cheeks were deadly pale, his eyes had a haggard look, as if he had passed a sleepless night; and the sternness of his expression was intensified to such a degree that he looked perfectly unapproachable. He helped to carry the invalid down the broad staircase, and through the vast hall; but when the latter looked up into his face with a tired smile, and begged him to come and see him at Beechwood, he only shook his head, and said almost roughly,—

‘I sha’n’t be wanted there; and you’ll do very well without me.’

Gerald bent forward in eager protest, but Paul drew up the window, slammed the door, and stepped back; the winning face, which was so like Maude’s, and yet so unlike, photographed for ever on his brain. He felt lonely, desolate, miserable, as he returned to the library, and closed the heavy door behind him. As long as Gerald was with him, he felt that there was some tie between himself and Beechwood, but now that he was

gone, that last link was broken. Yet Maude loved him, of that he was as certain as of his own existence. She loved him with the strength of her strong nature, and yet there was something she loved better. He stood still, on the hearth-rug, pondering over the marvel of her love for a dead Christ, as he called Him, overpowering her love for a living man. Could this be the barrier which was to keep them apart for ever, like travellers on two parallel roads between which there is no connection? It was an idea that he could not grasp. Faith in a God seemed to him something quite apart from the doings of daily life. If a girl believed in Jupiter and Venus, that would be no reason why he should not marry her. They could live together in the closest bonds of love. They could feel the rapture of the first kiss. They could dream their dream of ecstasy, and what would it matter if she stole out in the morning to lay her offering on the shrine of the Goddess of Beauty? Why should a creed of any sort or description stand between two lovers, like a high wall of separation? Why was this wall, different to all others, unclimbable by love, and not to be stormed by diplomacy or passion? Would a materialist refuse to marry a girl who did not believe in the double-faced unity of matter and mind? The girl would laugh in his face, and he would richly deserve his ridicule. Why was Maude Dashwood's belief in a higher position than any other? Why could it not be ignored, or kept apart; and why could not they be happy in spite of it?

He paced up and down the long room, his hands in his pockets, his brows drawn together, debating the most important question of his life. His mind

was utterly bewildered. 'I would rather die than marry you!' The words had been spoken with the same force of conviction as if they had been uttered by a martyr at the stake; and they had rung in his ears all night. He could offer her a good deal: a splendid home, an assured future, a good position, and a fortune large enough to gratify all her most extravagant wishes. He caught sight of his face and figure in a Turkish mirror, and it struck him, though he was as far from personal conceit as possible, that his was not the sort of personality that a woman is apt to despise. Also he knew for a certainty that he was no fool; his career at Oxford would give the lie to any man that dared to deny it. As he was a clever boy, he went up for his Univ. Pub. School Examination, and thus passed 'Smalls' before his 'Matric;' took a decent class in classical 'Mods,' and in his 'finals,' got a first in Natural Science. That was a record of which any man might be proud, and Maude Dashwood was the sort of girl to appreciate it. He knew, in fact, by a subtle instinct that she *did* appreciate him at his full value, and more than his value; and yet she would rather die than marry him! Extraordinary, insoluble enigma! He was convinced that he could make her happy; but that was of no use, because there was something she valued far more than her happiness. How was it possible to argue with an individual, who pinned all her hopes on another world beyond the range of sight or sound, or man's experience? A believer in a world of ghosts!

After his first transport of rage was over, Paul did Maude the justice to believe that she had not been influenced by scandal. Her love would have

been dead indeed, if she had attached any credence to Julia Goodwin's story; but he saw it in her drooping lashes, in the tremble about her lovely lips, in the flashes of colour that kept coming and going in her cheeks, and he knew that her heart was beating as wildly as his own, with all the passion and the tumult of a love that can never die. How often he had scoffed at the legendary stories of the martyrs' sufferings; but the sneer died away from his lips when he was face to face with a girl, who was ready to sacrifice herself at once for her faith, in these days of laxity and compromise, with all the heroism of those martyrs of old, and all the quietude of ungrudging service. It baffled him completely, and made a chaos of his mind. A religion that could influence a life to such an extent as this, in the nineteenth century, must be founded on something more than a set of legendary myths.

But no, this was contrary to all that he had gathered from patient research, and years of study. What would Landon say, or Mark Ferrol? Wouldn't they tell him that his intellect was rusting in the air of orthodox Elmsfield? If they could guess what he was going through, would not they jeer at him, and say,—'This sentimental fool, in order to win a girl's approval, is trying to delude himself into a belief which he knows is founded on a myth.' They would have a perfect right to say it; but that did not make it true. His heart had nothing to do with his reason; and that was unbiassed by sentiment. He seemed to himself to be groping in darkness, and utterly uncertain as to the side from which the light would come. On one side was Maude Dashwood, on the other a blank;

but the chances were he would have to choose the blank.

That night he was engaged to dine at the Castle ; and, very much against his will, he drove over in his dog-cart. Anyone could see that half his mind was elsewhere ; but the vivacious widow whom he took into dinner, was perfectly satisfied to take the whole burden of the conversation on herself.

Josephine Seldon watched him anxiously ; and looked up with even more interest than usual, when he dropped into a chair by her side during the course of the evening. He was so pre-occupied with his one idea, that he seemed unable to talk on general subjects ; and she felt flattered instead of bored by the serious tone he gave to their conversation. Josephine talked well, and even brilliantly ; but all her light answers to his questions left him in a state of dissatisfaction.

‘Tell me honestly, Miss Seldon, don’t you think a man can cut just as respectable a figure in the world without a faith, as with it ?’

‘I don’t know. As long as the weather is fine, a mackintosh is unnecessary ; but when it rains, nobody but a fool or a pauper would be without one.’

‘In the same way, you don’t consider a creed a daily need, but only necessary under extraneous circumstances ?’

‘I think a man can be a pleasant companion, a charming friend, even if he believes in nothing but himself and the woman he is talking to,’ her bright eyes sparkling as she made a wrong conception of his drift, and gave an answer to suit it.

‘You would not be afraid of him in any relation of life—as father, brother, or husband ?’ very

earnestly, his dark eyes looking straight into hers in a way that she found very embarrassing.

Was this an offer couched in ambiguous terms? Her heart began to throb as it had not throbbed for many years; but she was not the sort of woman to lose a chance through excess of shyness, and she answered readily,—

'No, I could be just as good a daughter or sister to him, even if he had never learnt the Catechism.'

Her careful omission of the word 'wife' aroused him to a sense that he was treading on dangerous ground.

'I wish all the world thought like you,' he said slowly, taking refuge in generalisation.

'I hate narrowness,' she exclaimed energetically. 'What business have we to ask what our neighbour thinks, so long as he acts like a gentleman, and a man of honour?'

'None at all. Our thoughts are our own; our actions belong to our neighbours, because they affect our neighbours.'

'I quite agree with you. If I had been dragged before that tribunal at Rome, I would not have died like St Agnes. I would have thrown a pinch of incense to any god they liked to fix upon, and then gone home to say a prayer to my own.'

'That would have been sensible, but scarcely honest,' he said frankly.

'Perhaps not—but who cares to split straws when life is at stake? Heroism is out of date, martyrdom gone out of fashion. We all throw our pinch of incense, in politics as well as theology. The man who would die for anything except his country, does not belong to this century, or the one before.'



She thought she was saying the very thing to please him; and never guessed how mean and ignoble her views seemed when he compared them mentally with Maude Dashwood's. Only those who fly amongst the clouds are fit to mate with eagles. A sparrow or a parroquet would shiver to death in an eyrie. Paul had an admiration for a woman with a high standard, although he could not come up to it himself; and Miss Seldon rebuffed him most when most eager to attract. He could scarcely help seeing that his views were not considered a disadvantage by her; and yet she called herself a Christian, and probably gave the epithet of 'atheist' to himself. Why was this religion to be a barrier between Paul Nugent and Maude Dashwood, and nothing but a turnstile between himself and Josephine Seldon?

He went home with all his questions and doubts unsolved, and without the least suspicion of the fact that Lady Mortimer considered him almost, if not quite, engaged to her sister.

'Well, Joe, you and Sir Paul seemed to be having a very interesting conversation,' she remarked, with a mischievous smile, and an eager desire for information.

'Oh, he only wanted to know if a person of his views would be objectionable as a father, a son—or a husband,' with an air of indifference, but a slight relaxation at the corners of her mouth.

'That was coming very near the point.'

'Yes, but the point was blunt; so he went over it, without seeing it.'

'He seemed to me to be out of spirits.'

'A man usually feels rather low when he is crying for the moon.'

‘What do you mean?’ impatiently.

‘It’s so out of place to wish to marry a saint, when you haven’t a grain of religion about you.’

‘You don’t call yourself a saint, I hope?’ with sisterly frankness.

‘Hardly,’ her eyes twinkling with genuine amusement.

Lady Mortimer looked up quickly.

‘The wretch hasn’t proposed to Maude Dashwood?’

‘If he hasn’t, he will; but don’t be alarmed. She will crush him as flat as a blackbeetle.’

‘I don’t believe it. Sir Paul likes originality and animation. He would never fall in love with a statue, adorned with an aureole.’

Miss Seldon smiled; and, not wishing to confide her secret hopes to any one, kissed her sister, and retired to bed.

## CHAPTER XXIV

‘WHY DOESN’T NUGENT COME?’

SIR PAUL NUGENT, through a chain of small circumstances, depending little on personal predilection, spent a good deal of his time at the Castle about this juncture. As he was a first-rate shot, the Earl always liked to ask him to every battue ; and when there was no shooting, a game of billiards, or a ride with the ladies of the party, were made pretexts for tempting him from his solitude. He often came across Captain Fitzgerald in the billiard-room, but they made small progress towards friendship. He was a better player than Nugent, and contrived to win a good deal of money from him, which ought to have softened his feelings ; but he was clear-sighted enough to know that the Baronet was his most dangerous rival with his cousin ; and, in spite of his absence from Beechwood, he was still rabidly jealous. Paul soon found out that the guardsman was a reckless gambler ; and disliked playing against him, almost as much whether the luck were in his favour or dead against him. If he was beaten, he had the natural dissatisfaction of defeat ; and if he won, he was uncomfortable at the idea of impoverishing a much poorer man than himself. After the women had gone to bed.

the men sat up playing whist or poker till the small hours; and as Fitzgerald had a running invitation to the Castle, and did not object to making use of it, now that Maude was so engrossed with her brother, those games made a sensible difference in his income. Paul was ready for any sort of excitement, and willing to play as high as any of the others wished; but he never suggested exaggerated stakes, never tried to lead the other men on, and never lost his head. He consented to be no man's evil genius; and if any weak fellow chose to risk more than he possessed, he was determined not to have the ruin, which would naturally follow, laid at his door. Lord Mortimer was annoyed at the reports that got about the neighbourhood as to the high play up at the Castle; but Nugent would have been still more annoyed if he had known that he was credited with being the worst offender, and that gossip had carried the report to Beechwood.

Charlie Conway had gone away for a much-needed holiday; and Herbert Lovel was working like a labourer paid by the job, with the whole business of the parish thrown on his shoulders. He could scarcely find one half-hour to spend with Gerald Dashwood, in spite of its vital necessity; and a visit to The Chase was out of the question. Therefore Nugent, at the most critical time of his life, was reduced to sounding Miss Seldon as to the serious questions revolving in his brain; and though her answers rarely helped him, he found it a relief to his mind to discuss them. Lady Mortimer's hopes revived, and she gave him the heartiest welcome; but she was careful not to interfere in any way, and though she was dying to

hear his opinion of a new religion propounded by a sage of Bryanstone Square, she kept her curiosity to herself, and only worried her husband about it, till he crushed her, and it, by wholesale contempt.

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‘Maude, why doesn’t Nugent come and look me up?’ Gerald asked for the hundredth time. His father had taken him back to his kindly heart at the first sight of his wasted face, and the rest of the family had gathered round him in tearful, loving welcome. Many old friends had forgotten his past misdemeanours, and hurried to Beechwood in order to show their good feeling to the black sheep, whom the Dashwoods had elected to whitewash. But like a spoilt child who always cries for the one toy which is locked away from him, the invalid would not be content without the one man who kept aloof.

‘Haven’t you enough without him, dear?’ Maude said softly, as she smoothed back his short brown hair, and touched his forehead gently with her loving lips.

Gerald evaded the question, and asked abruptly, -

‘Why don’t you like him, old girl? He’s the best fellow out, without a scrap of nonsense in him.’

‘I do like him,’ with a fathomless sigh.

‘He doesn’t think it. He said he wouldn’t be wanted here. Can’t you drop him a line? He was awfully good to me. I—I don’t want to wait till—’

‘Auntie shall write to him,’ she interrupted him hastily. ‘And now, I’m going to read to you, for you mustn’t talk any more.’

Oh, that terrible gasping cough, which seemed to rack every nerve in her body as she listened to it! He was going from her as surely as autumn was passing into winter, and her love could avail

nothing to hold him back ; but she did not murmur. It was better far that he should die a repentant prodigal, his sins forgotten on earth and forgiven in Heaven, his last moments blessed by the holiest consolations of the Church, than to live godless, estranged, disgraced, and disinherited, a curse to himself and to all who loved him ! It was hard to face life without him ; but it would have been worse to look forward to a future of constant dread, when every post that came, or every society paper, might bring news of a fresh stain on a once honoured name.

Nellie regarded her cousin with a kind of wondering awe. In Maude's position she would probably have done her best to cry her pretty blue eyes out of her head, and to upset the composure of all around her. She could not understand the girl's present resignation, because she had never gauged the depths of her almost morbid fear as to what her brother would do next, or as to what would happen to him before the end. Her own heart had bounded with sympathetic joy when the Squire's sternness melted from him, and in a broken voice he ejaculated, 'God bless you, my boy !' But to part with Gerald now, when only his virtues were apparent, and all his vices dead or dormant, seemed the acme of everything that was most heart-rending. Yet there was an expression of rest and peace on Mr Dashwood's face, such as it had not known since he tore up the will which left Beechwood to his only son ; and Maude was as calm as a nun who turns her face to heaven, her back to the world.

'Write to him yourself, Maude. He is sure to come if you ask him,' Gerald persisted, in his low, weak voice, which in its very weakness was strong to influence his sister.

And she yielded, sitting down at once by the little table which she had drawn to the bedside, without one outward sign of the reluctance which she felt so deeply. Her cheeks flushed as she wrote the words, 'Dear Sir Paul,' and her hand shook.

'Tell him to look sharp.'

She wrote 'Immediate' outside the envelope, then rang the bell, and gave orders that a groom should ride over to The Chase with it at once.

It was evident to all that Gerald was sinking fast; and no one could make a pretence of fighting against the belief any longer. Miss Wyngate, who had always kept a soft corner in her heart for the scapegrace—was there ever an aunt who did not do so for a dissipated nephew?—was quite subdued, and knitted a few tears in with her white wool, as she sat by the drawing-room fire making a comforter for him which he would never wear. Nellie wandered restlessly about, feeling as if she could settle to nothing, afraid to play on the piano, unable to read, and not reposeful enough to work. When it was growing dusk—afraid of waiting till the morning—they sent for Lovel, and then all gathered together in the sick man's bedroom. A hush seemed to fall on the whole house as the Blessed Eucharist was celebrated, and the dying man received it for the last time. As the words of the Absolution fell slowly and solemnly from the lips of the white-robed priest, Maude bent her head in absolute surrender to the will of God. Now that he was reconciled with Heaven, she could give up her loved one into the arms of his Father, and wait for a reunion in the glad Hereafter.

## CHAPTER XXV

### INTO NOTHINGNESS—OR INTO THAT OTHER WORLD?

‘No answer from The Chase?’ Maude asked, as she passed through the hall on her way to Gerald’s room, after a slight pretence at dinner.

‘Sir Paul was at the Castle, miss,’ the butler answered, with an injured air.

At the Castle, well amused, no doubt, with the lively society which the Countess always gathered round her! At the Castle with Josephine Seldon, who was just the wife for a clever man, Maude thought to herself, with a shade of bitterness, as she went slowly up the stairs, feeling as if she had rather too heavy a burden on her slender back. She had persuaded her father to take a nap on the sofa before he returned to the invalid’s room, as he was getting worn out with his fretting anxiety. Gerald was asleep as she stood by the bedside—in a simple black evening dress, which showed off the beauty of her exquisitely moulded neck and shoulders, and the softly rounded arms which might have belonged to an Aphrodite.

Gerald presently woke, and looked up into her sad face with his wonted smile. In spite of his laboured breathing, there was a look of peace on his delicate features; and Maude, as she flung her



white arms round him, and drew him gently towards her with irrepressible longing, felt that it was well Sir Paul had not come ; it was so sweet to have him all to herself. She was kneeling by the bedside, her red lips were softly kissing the worn white brow, and all the love in her heart showed itself in the tender protectiveness of her expression. It was a lovely picture, framed in the tapestried curtains of the bed ; and Sir Paul, who had entered unperceived—the servant's gentle knock having passed unnoticed—stood still at a few paces from the door, holding his breath, and drinking it in with his eyes. He had come the moment the note reached him, straight from the dinner-table, with a light coat thrown over his evening things. And now the beauty and the pathos of the scene before him struck to his heart, and made him dumb.

‘Ah, there you are!’ exclaimed Gerald, in scarcely more than a husky whisper ; and in a moment Maude was standing up, an exquisite flush spreading over her neck and up into her cheeks, as she looked round with startled eyes.

‘Thank you so much for sending for me,’ said Sir Paul, looking earnestly into her face, as he held her hand without daring to press it. ‘I came the moment I got your note.’

She tried to speak, but heart and voice failed her ; and with a slight bend of the head she passed by him and went to the door. He watched her till the door closed behind her, and then walked slowly towards the bed. He saw that the hand of Death had already claimed Dashwood for his own ; and, unstrung by his meeting with Maude, and overpowered by pity and compassion for the young life cut off before it reached its zenith, a choking feeling

came in his throat, and tears rushed into his eyes.

'I'm so glad you've come,' his fever-bright eyes fixed on the handsome face above him, so changed and softened from its usual sternness. 'I wanted to tell you—I see it all now. I've been such a fearful fool—'

'Don't talk of it now, old boy,' said Paul huskily. 'We are all fools in our day.'

'Yes, but you—you—oh, Nugent, if you knew!' raising himself on his elbow.

'I knew what? Don't worry about me,' dropping on one knee so that he might be nearer to the straining, anxious face, which was as serious now as Lovel himself could have wished it to be.

'I can't talk cant,' drawing his delicate brows together, 'and you would only grin if I did. But promise—*promise!*' panting for breath.

'Anything you like,' earnestly.

'Talk to Lovel—O God—' With that name on his lips, his head dropped back on the pillow, his eyes closed. His little mission was fulfilled, and his strength, which had lasted just enough for this, was going from him. It had weighed on the poor fellow's mind for days, that perhaps, by his own carelessness and irreligion, he had strengthened Nugent in his atheism; and, as the truths of Eternity grew clearer to his dying eyes, he resolved to undo this one wrong if he had to leave so many others unrighted. He had also some hazy idea of an attachment between Nugent and his sister, and he wanted to repay some of her wonderful goodness by smoothing the way; but his head was heavy, and his thoughts were growing confused.

Paul looked down on the fair young face, lined

and worn as that of an elderly man, yet stamped with the beauty of the Dashwood race, as well as with the disease which was Gerald's fatal inheritance from his mother. There was a strange ethereal beauty on it now, and the likeness to Maude was intensified. Moved by an irresistible impulse, Paul bent forward and kissed his forehead as if he had been a girl. The dark lashes, lying so heavily on the white cheeks, never stirred, there was not a movement in the parted lips. With a sudden pang of fear, he started to his feet, and, stretching out his hand, pulled the bell. Almost before he had touched it, there was a sound of hasty footsteps, and Maude was in the room, with her father close on her heels. He hurried away, feeling as if he were an intruder, whilst she sprang towards the bed with an agonised cry—with no eyes—no thoughts for anyone but her brother, who was going from her. Outside, in the corridor he stepped into a recess as Nellie, her pretty face all wet with tears, came running past, followed by Miss Wyngate, puffing and blowing with the unusual exertion, and making all the haste she could. Next came the old housekeeper, who had nursed the dying man as a baby; and loved him like the true woman she was, all the better because the rest had, justly or unjustly, cast him off. Her plump face was curiously puckered up, and the pocket-handkerchief she carried in her hand was reduced to a wet rag. Behind her portly figure, came several other servants who had known the young master as a boy. They clustered round the half-open door, and for a minute there was no sound to be heard but stifled sobbing. Then the silence was

broken by a voice like an angel's, which seemed to carry the thoughts of the listeners from the sorrow of the earthly parting to the joy of the heavenly reunion, as Maude, conquering her own grief, sang softly and clearly her mother's favourite hymn,—

‘For ever with the Lord !  
Amen ; so let it be ;  
Life from the dead is in that word,  
’Tis immortality.’

Paul stood spellbound as the lovely voice rose and fell. It seemed a message straight from some other world to him alone, and it carried him away, and lifted him out of himself into a higher and heavenlier region, to which his earth-bound soul had never soared before. ‘For ever with the Lord ;’ the words rang in his ears when the hymn was ended, and he made his way down the unfamiliar passage to the staircase, and thence to the hall. There was no one about as he glanced round. It was gay with flowers from the hothouses ; and Turkish *portieres*, and pretty coloured mats strewn here and there, gave a pleasant look of refinement and warmth, such as contrasted vividly with the cold stateliness at The Chase. The word ‘home’ seemed to be engraved on it all ; but the stillness of death overpowered every other impression.

Paul stood still in the silent house. A great awe had fallen upon him. Gerald Dashwood's soul was passing away, either into nothingness or into that other world of which the Christians dreamt. ‘Into which ?’ he asked, in an agony of doubt, as the sweat stood out in large drops on his forehead. It was the greatest question that could be asked ; but where was the answer to come from ? The soul as it passed could not tell

him. Those upstairs, watching every look and sign, might see the light go from the failing eye, the breath from the weary chest, the pulse from the aching heart, but they could not follow the soul on its first step as it passed from the lifeless clay; it went, in one instant of time, beyond mortal men. And yet how many hundreds and thousands of primitive Christians had given up their lives gladly, and even joyously, in the certainty of a glorious Hereafter? Surely in the deaths of the martyrs was the answer, for men do not die readily for a fable. He opened the door, and passed out into the night. A myriad of stars were shining in a cloudless sky; and, as he gazed earnestly, fresh points of light appeared till the whole purple vault shone resplendent with its countless millions. Was it true that there was another world where an equally countless number of souls were bathed in the glory of their God; or had they all lived but for a space on earth, and died like the moth dies when it passes through a flame?

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### GERALD'S WISH.

AFTER Gerald Dashwood's death, there was a complete exodus from Elmsfield ; and Herbert Lovel found nothing to distract him from the calls of the parish. Dr Abbott was enjoying himself amongst the flowers and the sunshine of the south of France ; and talked of coming home whenever his health would allow him. Meanwhile, he hoped that all was going on well at home ; and that Lovel and Conway would apply to him in any case of difficulty. Lovel smiled as he read the letter, for it was his constant practice to get through all difficulties unaided, and only to tell his Rector of them when they were surmounted. Correspondence at such a distance would involve vexatious delays, and give a trouble, time to double itself, whilst waiting for the Rector's advice. The other method was more expeditious ; and recommended itself to the common sense of all the parties concerned. The Mortimers were spending the fag-end of the autumn in a peregrination from one country-house to another, which was just the sort of thing the Countess delighted in. Wherever she went, she gathered in a crop of new opinions, picked up every fresh anecdote that came within reach of her

ears, startled old dowagers by new-fangled notions as to everything in earth or heaven ; and returned home with her head in a jumble, every novel idea jostling up against another in the bewildered chaos of her brain. Josephine Seldon, meanwhile, was left to stroll up and down the King's Road, Brighton, with little Lady Rose for her companion, and the sea for her constant delight. She was of an eminently practical nature, but sometimes the moon on the shimmering waters was too much for her ; and, in a mood as sentimental as any school-girl's, she would watch the play of the waves, and think of a pair of dark eyes, and a voice which was music to her ears. She heard of Sir Paul Nugent once, for the Mortimers came across him on his walking tour in Yorkshire. Lady Mortimer kindly mentioned that he had asked after her sister, which made Brighton seem the most delightful place in the world for the rest of the day, for great effects are often produced by the most insignificant causes. The Dashwoods had gone to Folkestone for change of air and scene—as the phrase runs—for the Squire was growing anxious about his daughter. Though she had borne up so well, both before and after Gerald's death, a kind of lassitude had come upon her, and she seemed unequal to much exertion. Nellie devoted herself to her entirely, and watched her with the wistful eyes of a dog. She was ready to take alarm at the slightest sign of delicacy ; for, death having once broken into their circle, she felt as if they would never be safe again. Charlie Conway came back from his holiday fresh and invigorated ; and by persistent worrying at last induced Lovel to allow himself a fortnight's rest. He ran down to Folke-

stone for a breath of fresh air, and was warmly welcomed by the Dashwoods. They shrank from all their lively acquaintances, whose high spirits jarred on their sorrow ; but they were thankful to see an old friend, whose presence cheered them, because he understood their grief and sympathised with it. They took long rides together over the hills, and the fresh wind and active exercise brought a lovely colour into Maude's cheeks. And often, when the Squire and Nellie were taking an evening walk on The Lees, and Miss Wyngate was dozing in her arm-chair, the two who sympathised with each other so completely had long quiet talks, which left Maude with a pleasant sense of refreshment, and Lovel with a yearning wish to take care of and shelter her from all the troubles of the world, which, in spite of his constant habit of self-denial and self-repression, he found it a hard battle to subdue. He had to exercise the most constant watchfulness over every look and word, for if Maude ever suspected the nature of his feelings towards her, the whole freedom and pleasure of their intercourse would be spoilt. It was his effort to spiritualise their friendship as much as possible, until little that was carnal was left in it. He wished to be her friend and pastor ; and never to let the two be disunited.

He told her one day that the Bishop of Rochester had offered him a living on the other side of his diocese ; and had the pleasure of seeing the dismay in her face before he confessed that he had refused it.

'The people know me in Elmsfield and Elmersbridge ; and I fancy I get on with them better than a stranger could.'

'Oh, yes, don't leave us, promise me that you



won't?' looking up into his face with an earnest appeal in her lovely eyes.

The blood rushed to his cheeks, the veins on his forehead swelled.

'I know it's selfish to ask it, you are so clever, you ought to go on and on till you were a Bishop or a Dean; but what would become of Hart's Alley without you? And oh, we should miss you so terribly!' her lips quivering, the tears filling her eyes.

'I won't go, nothing shall induce me; I love the place, I love the people,' putting his hand over his forehead. 'Besides,' he added, after a pause, in which he had steadied himself, 'I feel that I have a special mission there now. Your brother asked me to talk to Nugent.'

She got up from her seat, and, going to the window, leant against the framework; and looked out on the cold grey sea. Her heart was throbbing so that she could scarcely speak, as she mechanically watched the uncertain movements of a fishing-boat in the distance.

'Materialists are very hard to convince, aren't they?' she asked, in a shaking voice.

'Not so hard as positivists. Materialists are without any cult, therefore the way is open,' said Lovel reassuringly. 'In positivism it is blocked by the worship of Humanity. It has been said of positivism, "that it might teach a man to die with dignity, but not to live with hope."'

'Do you know anything of Josephine Seldon?' The question would have sounded irrelevant to anyone else but Lovel, who had the clue to her thoughts. 'Would she be the sort of woman to raise a man up, or to lower him?'

'Her standard would not scrape the stars, I fancy,' he said, with a slight smile, 'but most men would stop long short of that. I know nothing about her really, except that she's a pleasant neighbour at a dinner-party. She ought to marry a London man,' he added, as he took his place opposite to her, and watched her small hands playing with the tassel of the blind.

'She will marry Sir Paul Nugent, sne said slowly; 'I heard it from Lady Mortimer this morning.'

'There must be some mistake,' hastily, with a sudden flush on his usually pale face, and a wild bound of his heart. 'I could swear he doesn't care for her two straws.' He was conscious of a sudden elation as the possibility of the engagement flashed through his mind, but he fought against it; for, by the subtle sympathy of the man who loves, he knew what bitter trouble the news would mean to the girl he loved so far better than himself.

'They have been thrown together—and I believe in propinquity,' she said, with a brave attempt at a smile.

'Fitzgerald was often there.'

'Yes, and he saw it going on under his nose. He told me about it long ago.'

'Then he ought to have been ashamed of himself,' hotly.

'Why are you so angry?' in grave surprise. 'What *does* it matter to anyone but themselves?'

'I hate gossip,' rather taken aback. 'It's always a pack of lies.'

'I've no patience with the man,' exclaimed Miss Wyngate, rousing up out of her nap, and looking as fierce as an insulted turkey. 'He behaved like

a brute to the Frosts, that no one can deny; and as to that queer story about his wife—I believe every word of it’

‘Auntie, you know you said that he was quite right about the Frosts, and you were very glad that he had so much common sense; and as to that Miss Goodwin, you said she ought to be put in a pillory and gagged,’ said Maude quickly.

‘And if I did, it only shows that I was taken in like the rest of the world,’ with an offended sniff. ‘Fitz opened my eyes to a great deal, and I’ve never thought much of Sir Paul since—’

‘There are the others, and Fitz is with them!’ exclaimed Maude, glad of any change of topic.

‘Then I will wish you good-bye. Need I say that I shall be thankful to see you all back at Beechwood?’ looking down into her flushed face with an intense wistfulness in his eyes, though he constrained his tone to be careless.

‘Mind you never desert Elmsfield,’ with a fugitive smile, which seemed rather to deepen than to lighten the sadness of her expression.

Herbert Lovel went back to his work full of admiration at a girl’s courage, and humbled by a sense of his own unworthiness. He guessed that Maude Dashwood had refused Sir Paul on the day of the school-feast; and he knew that in doing so she had given up a girl’s dearest hopes for the sake of her faith. Yet she had borne herself bravely, and never allowed the sweetness of her disposition to be embittered by disappointment. Was he weaker than a girl? Or why was it that, every time he saw her, the struggle seemed harder, the fight more hopeless? When he reached home, Mrs Clowser regarded him criti-

cally, told him that he oughtn't to have come back for another fortnight, and suggested that slaving himself to death was not the way to get on in life. Mr Conway was at the night-school, but had left word that he would hurry back to supper in good time.

'And it will be a sin and a shame if he don't,' she said, with a cheerful smile, 'for I've got the beautifullest pair of pheasants before the fire, as could have made food of theirselves for an emperor.'

'Where did they come from?'

'From the Castle, with the Earl's compliments,' proudly, as if the thought of a coronet added an additional value to the birds.

'How kind people are!' Lovel exclaimed, in a tone the reverse of grateful. If he had his own way, he would have all such gifts made to the hungry and starving; and if it had not been for a fear of Mrs Clowser's indignation, it is probable that one of the birds at least would have found its way to Hart's Alley.

As soon as he was alone, he opened his photograph-book, and looked long at a vignette by Walery, which represented Maude Dashwood in a large plumed hat; her head was slightly turned over her shoulder, which showed off the exquisite lines of her throat; her eyes raised in dreamy inquiry. Long he looked at it, not moving, only thinking, *thinking* till he closed the book with a resolute hand, and, getting up on a chair, placed it on the highest shelf of his bookcase. Was ever fruit so sweet as that which grew on the forbidden tree?

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### THE JESUS OF THE GOSPELS, AND THE JESUS OF HISTORY.

IT was a wet evening when Sir Paul Nugent arrived at Elmsfield station ; and, as had happened before, on the day of his first meeting with Eleanor Dashwood, there was nothing to meet him. He scarcely commented on it, for he had got into the habit of entirely trusting to his own legs during his walking tour ; but he went so far as to leave his knapsack behind him, and say he would send for it the next morning. November is not the month that is generally chosen for pedestrian exercise ; but Paul wanted leisure for thought, and long tramps over the Yorkshire wolds supplied him with opportunity for reflection. The weather had been unusually fine, and he came back refreshed both in mind and body. The golden beeches were dripping ; every spike on the branch of the fir tree had its own drop of moisture ; there were large puddles on the muddy road, and yet Elmsfield, in the dim light, look fair and idyllic to Nugent's eager eyes. As he came up to the church, he was surprised to see so many people streaming in through the open door, whence a bright light shone on a forest of umbrellas ; most of them must have walked over from Elmersbridge, willingly undertaking a

long trudge in the wet for the sake of an evening service.

Shrouded from observation by the darkness, Paul stood under the hedge on the opposite side of the road, and watched the various items of the congregation. There was the click of a gate on his left; and presently two small be-mackintoshed figures come paddling along the road, whom he recognised at once as the Miss Singletons. A minute later, Herbert Lovel came quickly out of the Lodge, and vanished with long strides in the direction of the vestry-door. There was a light in Laburnum Lodge, but nobody came through that door; for Julia Goodwin never allowed her religion to interfere with her comfort. If it were perfectly convenient, and there was really nothing against it, she condescended to attend the service. The slightest headache, and the smallest shower, were enough to keep her at home, although she was a woman who would have gone through much for the sake of her personal enjoyment. Nugent's lip curled as he thought of her, for he had the profoundest contempt for anyone who professed to believe, and did not take the trouble to act up to that belief. The bell stopped, the doors were being closed; when, moved by a sudden impulse, he walked quickly up the path he had never trodden before, and found himself standing with dazed eyes on the threshold of the brilliantly-lighted church. Somebody touched him on the arm, and motioned him to a seat. He mechanically took the place that was offered him; but when there was a sudden movement, and all the congregation knelt, or pretended to kneel, he sat severely upright. He had never bent his knee in worship; and he was not

going to do it now just to copy his neighbours. As the service proceeded, he would certainly have escaped, if he could have done so without attracting attention; but he felt as if it would be bad taste to interrupt other people's devotions, and even rather discourteous to Lovel. A large sum of money had been spent by his own uncle on the interior of the church, and especially on the East end; and, as he looked round and noted the low screen, the exquisitely carved reredos, all in white marble, the high altar, with its beautiful frontal, the brazen cross, set with amethysts, reflecting back every ray of light that fell across it; the handsome vases, filled with white azaleas, and the tall candlesticks; he said to himself that the effect was very good, and calculated to make a deep impression, if only from an æsthetic point of view. He was impatient for Lovel to get up into the pulpit, and to judge for himself of his eloquence. He looked curiously round to see if there were any signs of boredom amongst the congregation; for he had often heard a man boast in Essex, that he never slept so well in his bed, as he did during the sermon in the village church. But no, all eyes were turned to the pulpit as now there was a flutter of a white surplice on the short flight of steps; and there was a look, as of pleasant anticipation, on every face that came within his range of vision.

Lovel struck Nugent as looking pale, and worn, and tired as he gave out his text; and he made up his mind at once that he had made a bad shot in coming to the church that night, for the preacher would certainly not be at his best; but he was wrong. Lovel had to suit his sermon to the simple villagers as well as to the well-to-do manufacturers

of Elmersbridge, who came to church in good broad-cloth, and with their intellects sharpened for controversy. These latter were not inclined to take everything for granted as their fathers had been content to do; and they demanded that their religion should be made clear to their reason, as well as to their heart. The preacher tried to reach them all; for freethought had laid its chilling touch on the faith of many, and, as he looked round on the congregation, his heart felt heavy with the important task before him.

In a low, clear voice, he gave out Heb. xiii. 8. 'Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.' He told them that these words were a rock to which the dying Christian might cling, when the waters of death were breaking over his head. They were strong as the wings of an eagle, to bear fainting souls to Heaven. All that was earthly bore the stamp of change; every part of our mortal bodies changed, as the scientists tell us now, in one short year; but Christ was the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever, because He was God as well as man—the Saviour who stretched His arms from the Cross of shame to embrace a world. The grandest thought that could fill the mind of man, was, that through all the tumult of striving nationalities—through all the strife of bewildering passion—through the fall and rise of empires, there had always been one hallowed spot where the weekly sacrifice went up for eighteen centuries—the altar of Christ's Church, where the Christian lost his burden of sin, and found his God. Then he touched upon the efforts of rationalism to reduce the religion of Christ to the level of a myth. The reign of myth was over when writing was once



established in the world ; and whenever a written record is placed before the eyes of generations, the mythic power of man vanishes.\* From Moses to Herodotus, is the dawn of history ; from Herodotus to Tacitus, its morning ; Tacitus is its noon, and that noonday still endures. Printing saved history fifteen hundred years after Christ ; as writing saved tradition fifteen hundred years before. Jesus Christ, therefore does not belong to the reign of tradition, but to the reign of writing. Christ delayed His coming till the progress of learning had dissipated the clouds of fable ; and His figure stands out against the gloom of antiquity in the full light of publicity ; and lit up by the glory of fulfilled prophecy. He told them that it was another palpable error, to assert that Christianity was a fusion of the former religions of the world. It was a flat contradiction to the dualism and fatalism of the Platonists in the West ; as well as to the pantheism and metempsychosis of Brahminism in the East. It was in complete antagonism to the Jewish idea of the Messiah ; and found its bitterest enemies in what ought to have been the stronghold of the Faith. Everywhere Christ met with opposition ; for idolatry was a political necessity to the Roman rulers, and, in its gaudy shows and constantly recurring festivals, a source of infinite delight to the people. The cruel cry of 'Crucify Him,' in Jerusalem, was echoed in far-off Rome, a few years later, by the bloodthirsty shout of '*Ad leones*,' from the pitiless populace. The first three centuries of the Christian Era were steeped in blood, because men, women, and children, gave their lives fearlessly for the faith of Christ.

\* Lacordaire.

Had anyone died to prove that Julius Cæsar fell by the hand of Brutus; or that Leonidas was numbered amongst the slain at Thermopylæ? Not one. They had been great men, but they were dead, and therefore powerless to affect the world for good or evil; for no help can come from the grave. The Christians were strong in Jesus Christ, because He had risen again. He was their strength, because He was *alive*, and glorious to save. He told them the spread of the Gospel was so fast, in spite of all the powers of heathenism rising up against it, that, so early as the year 64 A.D.—only twenty-seven years after the death of our Lord—Tacitus wrote ‘that an immense multitude of men were seized in Rome, whom the common people called Christians.’ Almost in the words of the Apostles’ Creed, this pagan historian goes on to say, ‘They derived their name and origin from Christ, who, in the reign of Tiberius Cæsar, had suffered death by the sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate.’ He continues, ‘For a while this dire superstition was checked, but it again burst forth (you see, nothing could keep it back, because God was behind it, and in it), and not only spread itself over Judæa, the first seat of this evil, but even in Rome.’ Was I not right in saying that the light of publicity was on the life, the death, the teaching of Jesus Christ? If He had been an impostor, would not these Pagans have found it out? If the Resurrection had been a fable, would not the Jews who crucified Him, have proclaimed it with an exultant shout, which would have re-echoed from one end of the Roman world to another? He told them that, sixty-one years after the tragedy of Calvary, we had fresh proof of

the spread of Christianity in a letter, written by the younger Pliny—pro-consul of Pontus and Bithynia—in which he appealed to the Emperor Trajan for commands, as to what measures he should take against the Christians. He tells him ‘that a great number of persons of every age, rank, and sex were compromised, and that others would be ; and that not only the cities, but the towns and villages were overrun with that contagious superstition.’ This Gospel, which was dead against the exclusiveness of the Roman nobles, and in sternest opposition to the licentiousness of the whole pagan world, had come forth like a flood from the depths of hated Judæa ; and, spreading from province to province, after the lapse of three centuries, carried on its topmost wave a Christian Emperor to the imperial throne. Was there nothing superhuman in this marvellous success ? There was a wide chasm between the small knot of illiterate fishermen on the banks of the Jordan and the purple of that Roman throne ; but the power of God bridged it, and, where He leads, man can always follow. He told them how the apostate Julian had trampled the Cross of Christ under his scornful feet ; and yet, in the hour of defeat and death, remorse wrung from his paling lips the cry, ‘Galilean, Thou hast conquered !’ before his wounded body sank at the feet of his guards. And, passing on to a very different period, he told them how Rousseau, in the face of all his blasphemies, conquered at last by the sublimity of the Gospels, wrote, ‘If the life and death of Socrates were those of a philosopher, the life and death of Jesus Christ were those of a God.’ How Napoleon, alone with himself and his conscience on his sea-girt rock, after comparing him-

self with the other conquerors of the earth, said, 'I know men, and Jesus Christ was no man.' He had conquered half Europe, but in the end Christ conquered the conqueror—not the Christ reduced to nothing but frail and faulty man, in the 'Leben Jesu;' not the enthusiast, 'sincere, perhaps, even in his delusions,' of the 'Vie de Jèsus;' but the Saviour, the Redeemer, the Son of God, and Lord of Glory,' 'the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever!' And then, in a burst of eloquence, he told them of the teaching in the life of Christ, His immeasurable tenderness to the sinner, His hatred for sin itself. His delicate, intellectual face glowed with a spiritualised beauty, his eyes shone as with the fire of inspiration; and the congregation as one man hung on the words as they fell from his lips. The Jesus of the Gospels was presented to them—no figure clothed in myths, but the Jesus of History, the Son of God, who came down to earth as it had been prophesied of Him since the fall of man. Doubt had assailed Him, negation had denied Him; but when the doubter had passed away, when the negationist's pen fell from a dead hand, He still lived, 'the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever, with hands stretched out to pardon, and yearning eyes looking towards the lost.'

As the preacher's clear voice died into silence, the whole congregation knelt; and Sir Paul Nugent, carried entirely away by a wave of devotion, fell on his knees, and bent his head in wordless prayer.

The church was quite empty when he stood up, and looked round him with half-bewildered eyes. A change had come over him, and he knew it, as he watched the caretaker putting out the lights. The whole body of the church was in darkness; but

the altar lights were left for Lovel himself to extinguish, and their light was concentrated on the brazen cross, and a white-winged, marble angel in the reredos, who seemed to be watching over it.

There was the click of the vestry door. Paul started; and then walked out quickly, as if he were afraid of being seen.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### THE BATHYBIAN THEORY.

LORD MORTIMER was seated in Sir Thomas's arm-chair, by the side of the highly-ornamented fireplace in the library of The Chase. He had just come back from a most unsatisfactory day with the hounds; and his boots and white cords were encrusted in mud, whilst his temper was slightly on edge. He had his wife's express orders to bring Sir Paul to the point with regard to Josephine Seldon; and the commission was as distasteful to him as pottering about all day over muddy fields, and through dripping covers, without the chance of a find. He threw out several hints in a blundering sort of way; but Paul passed them by without notice, as he sat on the edge of the table, staring into the fire with grave eyes, a cigarette between his teeth, and his hands in his pockets. The Earl's presence was intensely irksome to him at the moment, and he did not take as much trouble as he ought to conceal the fact.

'Can't understand you, Nugent,' Lord Mortimer remarked impatiently. 'You profess to be as fond of sport as any of us, but you weren't "out" any day last week.'

'I only came back last night, so I couldn't very well.'

'Then there was to-day. You didn't know that it was going to be a blank.'

'I had heaps of things to see after ; and I wasn't in the mood,' his face flushing.

'Not in the mood ! What ridiculous affectation !' was Lord Mortimer's mental comment, but he only said aloud, 'Perhaps you won't be in the mood for dancing on the 19th ?'

'I'm certain I sha'n't ; but what's up ?'

'Nothing much,' stiffly.—'A small hop ; but it is my sister-in-law's birthday,' with an accent on the last part of his sentence.

'Awfully good of you,' began Paul, when the Earl interrupted him, with what seemed to him most unnecessary sternness.

'Don't trouble yourself to hatch up an excuse. If you don't want to come—hang it all ! you can stay away.'

'Who says I don't want to come ?' with a calmness that was most irritating to his guest.

'You looked it all over. And I must say, Nugent,' standing up, throwing away his cigar, and pulling up his collar with a decided accession of dignity, 'your conduct surprises me. It seems to me that a short time ago you were as glad to come to us, as we were to have you.'

'Yes, Lord Mortimer ?' inquiringly.

'But if it was all to end like this,' getting red in the face, and walking quickly towards the door, 'I could wish you hadn't come so often. There ! say no more about it.'

'But I must,' hurrying to the door so as to reach it first. 'Lady Mortimer honoured me with her friendship from the very first ; and why should it end ?'

‘Not only Lady Mortimer.’

‘No, and you’ve been so very good to me.’

‘Not only I,’ with a frown.

‘No, you’ve all been so good to me. I should be the last man to forget it. But why do you wish I hadn’t come so often?’—looking him straight in the face, in a way that was slightly confusing. ‘If the play was high, it wasn’t my fault. I wasn’t afraid of ruining myself; but, when the luck is with me, I object to ruining other people.’

‘Pshaw! none of the men were chickens; and, after all, the house was mine, not yours, so who would dream of blaming you? That Fitzgerald’s a born gambler; and if Dashwood hopes to keep Beechwood in the family by marrying him to his daughter, he never made a greater mistake. They must tie it up tight, or the place would be in the hands of the Jews before the end of the honeymoon.’

The Earl was studying the bookshelves at the moment, and was so struck by the empty places under the head of ‘Theology,’ that he did not notice the change in Paul’s face, or the hoarseness of his voice, as he said slowly,—

‘Surely Miss Dashwood must know her cousin’s character by this time?’

‘I doubt it. He is so near to her, that she never sees him in perspective. But hulloa! Nugent,’ tapping the shelf with the end of his hunting-crop, ‘how’s this? Coming over to our side after all?’

Paul winced, and at once wrapt himself in his coldest reserve.

‘I always study both sides of a question,’ he said, with a glance at the table, which was strewn with the best controversial works; ‘and I can see that, in



spite of Strauß and Baüer, you have more than a mythical foundation to go upon.'

'By George! I should think we had; much obliged for your patronage,' with an ironical smile. 'We've rather a stronger foundation than Strauß had, himself, when he challenged the world with the new-found theory of Bathybius. According to him, Bathybius had expelled miracle, and no educated man could remain a Christian, when all the while, he was digging a grave for his own reputation in the deep-sea ooze, where it ought to be buried for ever.'

'That would be very unfair,' said Paul quietly, with none of the heat, however, with which he would have defended the German scholar a few months ago. 'Häckel was just as deeply implicated; indeed, Huxley talks of "Bathybius Häckelii."'

'Yes, and Huxley supported him through thick and thin; but he had to change his tone after the voyage of the *Challenger*. The "sheet of living protoplasm" is a very different kind of thing to the reality, which is only a mass of slime, filled with the dead remains of once living organisms. What a heap of trouble men give themselves, in order not to believe in a Creator!'

'It certainly saves a heap of trouble to believe in One. But the easiest way is not always the truest; and, if we make mistakes, we always confess them.'

'Because you would be found out, if you didn't. I was talking to a German professor, the other day; and he told me that materialism had fallen to such a low ebb in his country, that they looked upon a materialist as only half educated.'

'Absurd!' throwing his head back with a short

laugh. 'I believe we have numbered some of the grandest intellects in the world amongst us.'

'Ah, yes, but you won't in the future. You mark my words, before 1900, materialism will be as dead as the fox we killed, last Saturday, in Hursley Bottom.'

'We shall see,' said Paul, with anything but a combative smile. 'Quite time for any other theory to crop up. Somebody, for instance, will discover that, instead of descending from apes, we go back to apes when we die.'

'Then, for goodness' sake, discover the elixir of life to save us all from monkeydom. Good afternoon, Nugent. Coming to us on the 19th?' said the Earl absently.

'Thanks, so much. The 19th? I won't forget; but, by-the-bye,'—an expression of amusement breaking over his face,—'I thought you were tired of me? You gave me a hint that I was not to come too often.'

'Pon my soul, I had quite forgotten,' looking embarrassed, as he rubbed his chin with the end of his crop. 'To tell you the truth, Nugent, it's my duty, you know, to look after my wife's relations as if they were my own.'

'I hope Lady Mortimer was not one of a large family?' said Paul, with an air of the most aggravating unconcern.

'No, sir!' exclaimed the Earl angrily; 'Lady Mortimer has but one sister, as good a girl as ever stepped, and I don't intend her to be trifled with.'

A sudden light flashed through Paul Nugent's brain, and his face grew grave as death. Had he 'trifled with Josephine Seldon?' he asked himself quickly, as, in an instant, he remembered their con-

fidential talks, their long rides, when they generally reached home a considerable time after the rest of the party. He thought how all this might have been misconstrued; and absolutely turned cold with dismay.

‘I don’t suspect that Miss Seldon would allow anyone to trifle with her,’ he said slowly, as he drew himself up, as if to parry an attack.

‘I don’t intend her to be tried, anyhow,’ the Earl returned sternly. ‘You’ve paid her a good deal of attention, for instance.’

‘Yes; but I assure you, on my word of honour, there has not been the smallest attempt at flirtation,’ as earnestly as if he were pleading for his life. ‘Our conversations have always been of the gravest kind.’

‘Far more dangerous than anything else. I’m a man of the world, and not easily taken in, but what I saw with my own eyes was enough for me. Why, confound it all! you were dangling at her heels every day of the week.’

‘I am perfectly certain that Miss Seldon never misunderstood me,’ quietly—though sorely troubled in mind.

‘I never said she did,’ with a frown.

‘Of course, if I dreamt that she had—’ he began very slowly.

‘Don’t alarm yourself, Sir Paul. My sister-in-law is not an empty-pated girl, willing to give her heart to the first comer. But there are certain rules of society which we are all bound to observe,’ looking haughtily down his aquiline nose, whilst his cheeks grew purple.

‘I was not aware that I had broken them, his dark eyes flashing, and his nostrils quivering.

'Then you ought to have known it. I've no hesitation in telling you so. But,' relaxing his tone somewhat, as he reflected that Josephine's dignity would be compromised by an open quarrel, 'no harm has been done as yet. But I must beg you to be more careful for the future.'

'What do you wish me to do, Lord Mortimer? I place myself in your hands,' folding his arms, with the air of a Napoleon.

'Nothing. Just "drop astern"—as the sailors say, and let the other fellows have a chance of speaking to her.'

'I think I had better keep away altogether.'

'Not at all, that would set every tongue wagging. The poor girl would be furious if she knew I had spoken about it.'

'I am certain that Miss Seldon never troubled her head about me.'

The Earl looked at the handsome face before him, with a queer expression in his eyes.

'Of course not,' he said, with a decision that he was far from feeling; 'nothing is more improbable.' And then, being sure that Paul's previous unconsciousness had not been put on, and coming to the conclusion that, after all, the young fellow had not behaved so badly, he stretched out his hand, and expressed a hope that they need not quarrel over it.

Paul shook it with his most cordial smile; but, when Lord Mortimer had ridden off on his hunter, he paced the room with a frown of intense perturbation.

Good gracious! what a fool he was—a senseless idiot! He had been so preoccupied with his own thoughts, that he had not troubled himself about

other people's. A fatal mistake to make! It was all very well for the Earl to smooth it over, but if Miss Seldon had mistaken him, was not he bound to do what he had involuntarily led her to expect?

The door was thrown open, and Seton announced 'Mr Lovel.'

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### HOSTILE CRITICISM EXPLAINED AWAY.

‘THE very man I most wanted to see,’ exclaimed Paul, advancing eagerly to meet the Curate. ‘Sit down, and make yourself comfortable. Then tell me how to get out of the most awful hole I was ever in, in my life!’

Lovel subsided into the same arm-chair that Lord Mortimer had just quitted; and expressed his willingness to give any advice that was best. He had come prepared to talk on a very different subject, for he had noticed Paul Nugent’s tall form in the darkest corner of the church, and he had hailed it as a sign that he was coming over to the true Faith at last. But he was possessed of tact enough to know, that he must wait till Nugent chose to broach the matter himself.

Paul sat down on a chair, and leant his arms on the back of it, as he began, with some confusion,—

‘I never was so staggered before. I won’t mention names; and, as we haven’t seen much of each other, I know you won’t guess whom I mean. A man has just been here to ask my intentions concerning a lady; I give you my word that I never thought of her at all in that way, I looked upon her simply as an embodied intellect. I went

to her for information on the gravest subjects, and I confess that I talked to her a great deal.'

'That was dangerous,' said Lovel, with a smile of relief, for, when Paul first began, he thought that the Squire had been making a fool of himself about his daughter; and he was thankful to see from the context, that he must be alluding to somebody else. Nobody, but a blind man, could forget Maude Dashwood's beauty for the sake of her intellect. 'Women are always credited with a certain amount of personal vanity, and even a golden-haired graduate in cap and gown, it would not be safe to treat as an intellect alone.'

'No, I suppose not, and perhaps I didn't; but I only meant to say there was no nonsense on either side. Now, tell me frankly, do you think I'm bound in honour to propose to her?'

'The world would say so; but we need not go by the world.'

'I know of no other standard; except my own sense of honour,' said Paul, with a blank face.

'You don't love this girl?'

'She's not a girl; in fact, she's older than I am. I admire her, I respect her—'

'That's enough,' with a smile. 'Before you were married a month, you would neither admire nor respect her; you would absolutely detest her. Now, is it fair to propose such a fate to any woman?'

'But she needn't have me; I promise you this, that if she didn't jump, I wouldn't hold out my arms to catch her.'

'But the proposal would be a delusion. She would naturally say, "He would never ask me, if he didn't love me." No, Nugent, you would be doing a wrong to yourself, but a deeper wrong

to her. She would have a right to say, "You've ruined my life."

'Won't she say it now?'

'She would have no right to, unless you made some sort of love to her.'

'But I didn't, I swear I didn't,' excitedly. 'To tell you the truth, my head was so full of somebody else that I quite forgot her, even when I was talking to her.'

'Then there is the "somebody else" to be considered,' in a low voice, for he knew that Paul meant Maude Dashwood.

'No,' starting to his feet in his eagerness, 'there is no one. But just tell me this, is it just or reasonable for a girl to refuse to marry a man, because he is not of her faith?'

'Certainly it is.' He bent his face low, then raised it up, white and resolute. It was a fearful effort to him to speak; but he conquered his reluctance. 'The martyrs would not pawn the honour of their Master, no more would the girl to whom I know you must allude. She cannot forget Him, for she receives Him constantly; and no one can guess the reviving power of the Holy Sacrament, when, under the forms of bread and wine—which seems such foolishness to you—God is spiritually received into the being of the believer. Of course, her love for Christ would outweigh her care for her earthly happiness.'

There was a pause, during which Paul Nugent's thoughts travelled far away from Josephine Seldon or Maude Dashwood, and the point of honour which he had raised. The scheme of Christianity opened before his mental vision, and dazzled him.



‘You believe that your Christ lives again in that sacrament; and you maintain that this sacrifice has been going on, in an unbroken order, since His death on Calvary?’ he asked, in an awe-struck voice.

‘Yes, for over eighteen hundred and fifty years. The critics may carp and cavil over most things, but they must leave that alone, as well as the historical continuity of our Orders, which cannot be disproved, and which is one of our strongest arguments in support of the Apostolic Succession.’

‘Tell me one thing,’ said Paul earnestly, ‘can the Bible be reconciled with science?’

‘The latest science? Yes, I believe it can,’ said Lovel firmly. ‘It was the fashion to say a few years ago that the story of creation must be wrong, because the various geological events described in it required thousands of years, instead of so many days. Now we find that the Hebrew word “yôm” means “period,” and has been wrongly translated “day,” and the period is of an indefinite length—so this difficulty vanishes at once. Then they wished to make out that the deluge was a mistake, because geologists could find no trace of it in different parts of the world; but the Hebrew *hāārêts* means “region,” or country, and has been inaccurately translated as “earth.” We now know that the deluge was confined to Western Asia; and that it is a fact, and no fiction, has been wonderfully confirmed by the tablets discovered by Mr George Smith. Again, there used to be controversy over “Let there be light,” for they said that no light could exist before the sun and moon. The theory of luminous nebulae did away with this objection, and proved the inspira-

tion of the passage for us ; science was not even in its babyhood when this story of creation was written, therefore it must have come to the writer by direct revelation from Heaven.'

'Well, but what do you say to evolution?'

'I say with Kingsley, "What harm can come to religion, even if it be demonstrated, not only that God is so wise that He can make all things, but that He is so much wiser even than that, that He can make all things make themselves.'

'Well, but man, and his descent from the apes?'

'I disbelieve in it ; and no one can prove it, for they have been looking diligently for the missing links, for more than forty years, *without finding them*. To say that we are alike in our beginnings, is nothing ; for all organic life starts from a bioplast, and yet no one finds a resemblance between man and a crocodile, for instance.'

'I know that the cubic capacity of the highest ape brain is thirty-four inches, and that of the lowest man sixty-eight inches, which of course leaves a wide gap.'

'Which no science will ever bridge. Don't you feel yourself worthy of the act of special creation in Adam?' with a smile. 'Compare your intellect with that of the cleverest monkey you ever saw.'

Paul made a grimace.

'I certainly feel an immeasurable distance between myself and the brutes.'

'But either way, the law of causation leads up to a God. One bioplast must come from another ; but who made the first? It is the same with the law of adaptation. Who adapted the infinitely complex machinery of the eye to the reception of

light? Is it reasonable to suppose that it was caused by an accidental concourse of molecules?’

‘No, I agree with you; men must walk about with their eyes shut to deny that there is a God, a Being of infinite intelligence.’

‘And of infinite love,’ said Lovel softly.

‘Yes, but this isn’t Christianity,’ with a sigh: ‘I don’t want to make a huge mistake. Like Robert Elsmere, I want to know the truth, as Peter thought he knew it, when he went to his cross as if it were a throne.’

‘You say with Pascal, “I believe in witnesses who give the testimony of their blood.”’

‘Yes, the deaths of the martyrs have always staggered me. Socrates’ followers were awfully fond of him; but no one thought of dying for him.’

‘And he never thought of saying to them, “Take this cup of hemlock.” “Do it in remembrance of me.” He left no command upon them at all, and if he had, do you think it would have been remembered ever since?’

‘No, it would be a wonderful thing if the request of any dying man weren’t forgotten, fifty years after his death.’

‘Yet the words of the Lord Jesus are as powerful now as when they were first spoken. How do you account for that?’

Paul shrugged his shoulders.

‘That is only one, amongst the innumerable things, I can’t account for.’

‘But the difficulty disappears when you once acknowledge Him as God. It is the fashion now amongst a certain set, to talk of “bringing Jesus down from the clouds, and restoring Him by criti-

cism to the domain of history.” Now, last night, I spoke of the Jesus of History as identical with the Jesus of the Gospels. They cannot clash, for the events in the Gospels are proved by contemporary history, if we wanted that proof, and the clouds they talk of, are raised by the critics themselves. The Gospel is clear as day.’

‘But I frankly confess that I’m in a fog,’ said Paul, resting his head on his hand. ‘I wonder if I shall ever struggle to the light.’

‘For a quarter of a century you have ignored the spiritual world ; and now that you catch a glimpse of it for the first time, you are naturally bewildered. Socrates, though he had no one to teach him, was nearer the light than you, for he believed in the immortality of the soul. He did not talk of the soul as a “secretion of the brain,”’ said Lovel, with an expression of disgust, ‘a secretion which must end with the brain itself. “You may bury me, if you can catch me,” he said to his sorrowful followers in Plato’s *Phædra*. “Do not call this poor body, Socrates. When I have drunk the poison, I shall leave you, and go to the joys of the blessed. I would not have you sorrow at my lot, or say at the interment, ‘Thus we lay out Socrates ;’ or ‘Thus we follow him to the grave and bury him.’ Be of good cheer ; say that you are burying my body only.” The pagan philosopher had a higher hope, and a wider outlook, than the materialists of the present day. His creed consisted of something more than a mere definition of matter.’

‘And yet how little he had to go upon—nothing but intellect, intellect which belongs as well to some of the most determined atheists of the present day.’

'He had something which they never possessed, an earnest yearning after the truth. I am certain that, wherever that is present, God has a means of satisfying it.'

'Pilate asked for it.'

'Yes, but he was afraid to wait for the answer. Plato was near the truth once, when he drew the sketch of the righteous man suffering dishonour, and even death, with meekness, although perfectly innocent; but there is an immense difference between this passage and the fifty-third of Isaiah, where "He was wounded for our transgressions" is the keynote of the whole. Nugent, get this into your head if you can,' leaning forward, and speaking with great earnestness, 'God is our Father, and you will never feel as if you were a lonely unit in a busy world again.'

Paul did not answer, but Lovel's words went straight home. It was the loneliness of his life, without any family ties, the solitude of the large mansion, with its succession of empty rooms, which had oppressed him sorely. To be loved, to be watched over by a Being who, though so infinitely above him, could stoop to care about his actions, seemed like a dream—a dream that, if true, would transform the world.

'How do you know this?' he asked, after a pause.

'From the Bible.'

'You consider it something more, then, than a collection of myths and legends?'

'I consider it the Word of God,' said Lovel reverently. 'I admire the scholarship of some of the men who have attacked it, but they have not weakened my faith in it by one iota. If part of

Genesis was written by an Elohist, and another by a Jehovist, it was still under the inspiration of God. If another than Isaiah wrote half of the book which bears his name—which I don't believe!—the glorious prophecies speak for themselves. The most audacious critics allow that they were written some centuries before the birth of the Redeemer they predicted. And as to the synoptic Gospels, Rénan himself allows that they must have been written before the destruction of Jerusalem, a date so near to the life and death of Jesus Christ, that it would have been impossible to foist a wrong account upon the Church, or the pagan world either. Eye-witnesses would have started up, in crowds, to contradict it, if anyone had been fool enough to try.'

'Then how do you account for the existence of discrepancies? I should have thought that one mistake would have shaken your faith in the whole.'

'Not at all. We do not insist upon verbal inspiration. These memoirs, as we might almost call them, were written down, no doubt, *partly* from oral tradition—the tradition *which had been carefully kept by the Church, and known to all her members*. In spite of this, the narratives dovetail into each other in a remarkable manner, and the discrepancies, which are not half as numerous as you imagine, leave the essence of the History untouched. Lacordaire, out of the many pointed out by Straüss, finds only three or four which he cannot by patience and scholarship explain away. Straüss thought it strange that the women were said by St Mark to have gone to the Holy Tomb "the sun being then risen," but, according to

St John, "when it was yet dark,"—Strauß wants to turn this so-called discrepancy to profit, in his arguments against the resurrection, but, as Lacordaire justly remarks, it suffices to remember that, when a distance has to be traversed, it is possible to start before dawn, and arrive after day-break. In another, the change of a Greek accent makes all the difference; and enables the text to agree with what is known as historical fact. Criticism is neither to be feared nor ignored; but if we cannot always find an answer to it, we are not to conclude that the answer will never be discovered. Anyhow, you will find no other collection of writings like the Bible in the world, a literature extending over at least one thousand years, but distinguished by a unity of thought which is amazing. The rites, symbols, and sacrifices of the Old Testament, find their full realisation in the person and history of Jesus Christ in the New, and every Messianic prophecy—its glorious fulfilment.'

'And all these prophecies were actually written before the translation of the Old Testament into Greek?'

'Yes, and the Septuagint version appeared, at least, one hundred and eighty years before Christ. This is a fact which you know as well as I do, and which nobody contests. In order to get rid of its importance, Robert Elsmere and his friends would have us believe that the apostles were so impregnated with the idea of these prophecies, that they invested an ordinary man with the attributes of Christ. But this would have been an impossible task. They might have depicted a narrow-minded enthusiast, or a word-splitting formulist like Hillel. Where would those four

illiterate Jews have found the pattern for a Jesus Christ? Neither amongst their surroundings, nor from the narrow confines of their imaginations.'

Even Gamaliel recognised the possibility that the disciples of Jesus might have made a stupid blunder; and yet, with infinite wisdom, advised that the preachers of the new faith should be left alone—being well-assured that if this movement was of man it must come to nought. At the same time, he was religious enough to add, that he, at any rate, would not lend himself to persecution, lest, what these enthusiasts were ready to die for, should prove to be the determined will of God. Besides, to return to these Gospels, they were not written on the same day, or even in the same city, so how could you account for the perfect resemblance of the Central Figure in all?'

'It would be difficult, certainly. Yes, utterly impossible, I see that,' said Paul, standing up, and beginning to pace the room. 'No half-beliefs are possible. I couldn't say with Elsmere, "I believe in the teacher, the martyr, the symbol to us Westerns of all things heavenly and abiding, the image and pledge of the invisible life of the Spirit,—that seems to me a faith without a backbone. Either Christ is everything that the Gospels make Him—Intercessor, Redeemer, and God; or else He is nothing, and the whole is a gigantic lie. I can't see a middle way."'

'You are right, there is no middle way,' said Lovel solemnly. 'Take away His Divinity, and nothing but an impostor remains, in whom I defy one living soul to find the smallest particle of comfort.'

'Please, sir, Mr Lovel's wanted at once,' said



Seton, coming out of the gloom at the end of the long room, to the patch of light by the fireplace. 'A man named Ward has had an accident; and they say he will die before morning.'

'Tell George to be ready to drive Mr Lovel down to Elmersbridge, in five minutes,' said Paul quickly, taking no notice of Lovel's remonstrance. 'Don't look so solemn about it,' laying his hand on the Curate's shoulder, as soon as the butler had left the room. 'It's the best thing Ward could do, to die, and rid his wife of his unpleasant self for ever.'

'Think of his soul,' said Lovel, with an awe-struck look on his face. 'The unfortunate fellow was an atheist!'

'Ah! I forgot,' the careless smile dying away from his lips, as the believer of to-day, standing on the luminous threshold of Christianity, looked back at the doubter of yesterday groping in the cold darkness of materialism, and saw that the whole standpoint was changed.

## CHAPTER XXX.

‘WHERE BE I A-GOIN’ TO?’

JAMES WARD, a coarse, hulking fellow, lay on the same bed as that on which his last boy had died. He looked as if he possessed the strength of a Sandow; and so he had when he started for his work in the early morning, with his wife’s daily warning ‘not to go near the beer-shop,’ ringing in his ears.

‘Poll wouldn’t be half such a kill-joy,’ he grumbled to himself, as he shouldered his hod, ‘if them —— parsons wouldn’t allus be a-thrusting their d—d trash down her guzzle. I’ll see that —— Lovel don’t darken our door again, cuss him! or he’ll come once too often.’

In the early dusk of the winter’s day, he was carried home on a shutter by some of his mates, a grey pallor on his usually flushed face, a queer sense of helplessness in his muscular limbs. And at the sight of him, the wildest of the women held her sharp tongue, and a sudden hush fell on the crowd which blocked up the narrow space of Hart’s Alley; for the shadow of the King of Terrors fell across the mirthless merriment of the drunkards reeling out of the ‘Black Monk,’ and stopped the shrill voices of the children, playing with walnut-

shells for boats, in the dirty waters of the gutters.

Ward had gone up a ladder which he was persuaded was a double one, and lost his balance in a vain effort to find the other half, when only a few rungs from the top. With a tremendous thud, he came to the ground, and lay in a heap just as he fell, till some of his horrified mates ran to help him up. His injuries were frightful ; but as Dr Hicks, who was passing, said there was no chance for his life, they thought it best to carry him straight home to his 'missus,' that he might die in his own bed.

Mrs Ward, whom he had treated as badly as any overseer in a coffee-plantation ever treated an ill-used negro, cried over him as bitterly as if her last joy were going from her. There is a wonderful fund of almost divine tenderness in some women ; and it is a fact that she forgot all his sins towards herself—the years of brutal roughness which had destroyed her health and broken her heart—directly he lay before her, appealing, in his pain and helplessness, to all that remained of her womanly powers of compassion. She bathed his forehead with loving hand, and spoke to him as tenderly as if he had been her last little yellow-haired son, but he took no notice of her, or of anyone else. His heavy brows were drawn together in a sullen frown ; his eyes were closed, except every now and then, when they stared round the room, coming back at intervals to rest angrily on a grimy print of the Crucifixion. This print had cost the large sum of twopence ; and Mrs Ward had purchased it out of the sovereign, which Sir Paul Nugent had laid on Tommy's coffin. The world seemed very empty to her just then, and she thought if she could be reminded of the

sufferings of our Lord, it would help her to bear her own a little better.

'Take down that —— pictur', came in a sudden growl from her husband's swollen lips.

She started, ventured on a gentle remonstrance, which was received with a curse, and then, detaching the print from the wall, put it carefully out of sight.

'You wouldn't like me to send for Mr Lovel, Jim?' she asked timidly.

'Want none of his —— humbug.'

'If I read you a chapter, wouldn't it kinder soothe you?'

'Keep that d—d trash for them as believes in't,' in a sullen growl, with a hasty movement of his powerless right hand. 'I've heerd it's nowt but lies.'

The room was only lighted by one tallow candle, not set in a gallipot as before, but standing in a pretty china candlestick which Maude Dashwood had given to Mrs Ward. Its feeble ray did not do much towards relieving the gloom; but it was a brilliant illumination compared with the darkness of Ward's mind. What was passing through his bewildered brain, his wife could not guess, as she sat by his side, her usually busy hands clasped idly in her lap. She knew that he was going from her as surely as Tommy did, but how could she sing, 'Safe in the arms of Jesus' to her husband, as she had to her child? The words would have no meaning for him, and could convey no hope.

The darkness deepened—the silence grew more than she could bear.

'Jim,' she said, with a catch in her voice, 'say summat to me—do ye, now!'

'If yer cared a ha'porth for me, ye'd have the doctor to patch me up,' he said, with a fierce anger in his husky tones. 'Send for 'icks.'

She knew it was no good, but she threw a shawl over her head, and stepped outside to send some ragged little urchin on the errand.

Half-an-hour later the young doctor stood by the bedside, with a very grave face. Medical skill and science could do nothing to stop the ebbing life, and he was not inclined to try useless remedies in order to show off his own cleverness. The blurred, bloodshot eyes looked up with a wild appeal.

'Just patch me together, doctor, and I'll pay you 'andsome. I can work with th' best of 'em when I'm not on the drink. Just keep th' life in me. Do ye, now.'

'I can't. Keep up your pluck, my poor fellow, and prepare for death ; God doesn't mean you to work again,' he said, gravely but firmly.

'I'm not in that crooel pain I was afore. I'm mending fast—see if I don't. I'm a bit sleepy, maybe, with lying so still. Never been a hinvalid afore—don't quite understand it,' moving his large head restlessly on his pillow, and attempting to smile.

Dr Hicks felt the position acutely, but he was of the opinion that it was a doctor's imperative duty to tell the patient, at once, when there was absolutely no hope. He knew that a fatal numbness was already spreading over the man's huge limbs ; and that, in an hour or two, it would end in the sleep that knows no waking. It would be the most mistaken kindness to keep him in ignorance of the truth. Very gently he broke it, but Ward fought

against it with terrified obstinacy ; till the doctor was obliged to leave him in order to attend to another patient, whose case was capable of amelioration.

He looked back from the doorway with a shudder, realising, perhaps for the first time in his life, how awful death can be when the merciful Hand which would have removed the sting, has been pushed aside by the cold contempt of the unbeliever.

When James Ward could no longer struggle against the conviction that he was going to die, he startled his wife by asking, with a curse, why she didn't send for the parson. And when Herbert Lovel came, he tried to cling to his coat-sleeve with nerveless fingers, as he panted out,—

'Where be I a-goin' to?'

Over what followed, it is best to draw a veil. In the last hour of his life, the man knew instinctively that he was going into the presence of the God, whom he had chosen to blaspheme and deny, and a mortal terror possessed his soul. His sins, like hideous ghosts, stood round his bed. They had been his familiar friends and chosen companions, they would not be absent now. He had hardened his heart for years, and the power of repentance seemed to have gone from him. He had been callous to all emotion ; and now no feeling possessed him but abject terror. He would not ask to be forgiven, because he could not at the last moment rise to the thought of a merciful Saviour. His clouded mind was entirely occupied with the awful realisation of a mighty Judge, and there seemed to be no room in it for a Redeemer. It was the worst half-hour that Lovel had ever spent since he had come to the priesthood ; and, in spite of his

earnest prayers and supplications, James Ward died in the depths of a shuddering despair ; and no words of comfort or exhortation could lift him out of them. It was his self-chosen fate, the end for which he had worked ever since he came to years of manhood ; and yet to Lovel it seemed most pitiful. He had taken 'Drink' for his god ; and it was this god, or rather devil, who had brought him to his death. He had taken vice for his comrade ; and this chosen comrade stood between his dim eyes and the Figure on the Cross. He could *tremble*, but he had lost the power of prayer.

Lovel came out of the house with a face as white as his own collar, and was surprised to find Sir Paul Nugent waiting for him. He had a great wish to know how such a man as Ward could meet his end, and he inquired with evident eagerness.

'Don't ask me,' said Lovel, with a shiver, 'it was too horrible.'

'Just tell me if he died an atheist?'

'No ; as far as my personal experience goes, I have never known unbelief last through the final hour. A knowledge of God always seems to come before the end ; but with this poor wretch it was only enough to fill him with fear.'

'I should have given the fellow credit for pluck,' said Paul thoughtfully.

'He was never afraid of anything in his life before. —Ah,' with a shudder, 'if you could only have seen him cowering under the bed-clothes, as if he felt the eye of God upon him.'

There was a long silence till they reached the end of the alley ; and then, as Lovel caught sight of a group of men standing round the doors of the 'Black Monk,' he stopped abruptly. His mind was

so full of the scene he had just gone through, that he felt he *must* say a word, in order to stop these other men from going down the same path as James Ward. Herbert Lovel was no fanatic; he did not even care to preach teetotalism, for he felt that those who worked hard, required some support to fit them for their labours; but out of the pain in his heart, he spoke to them, and touched a sympathetic chord in theirs. Those words spoken in haste from a grimy doorstep, did more good than any of his lectures in the night-school, for the men were awed by the death of their mate, and his fate had a terrible warning for them. Many slunk away to their homes; and a few, coming up to Lovel with tears in their eyes, gripped his hand, and promised 'never to darken those cursed doors again.' It was a moment of intense emotion for him, and he could scarcely control his voice, sufficiently, to give them a few cheering words of encouragement. He passed his arm round one boy's neck; and looked down into his flushed face, with the tenderness of a woman.

'You will be true, Jack? You *will* be brave, and stand firm?'

'Ay, sir, that I wull. I know yer for a rare plucked un yerself, and I'll set un up for a model, see if I don't,' looking up at the sweet, grave face above him, with shining eyes. Before Lovel could suggest a higher model, the boy darted away and was lost in the darkness.

'One soul lost, and several saved, as it seems, by that very loss,' said the priest, with a new light in his tired face. 'Inscrutable are the ways of Providence.'



‘Here you find your influence; there you seemed to have lost it,’ said Paul, as he turned to look for a cab.

‘Not my influence,’ said Lovel hastily; ‘I—personally—had nothing to do with it.’

‘Tell me, what is the secret of your power over these men?’ persisted Nugent, disregarding Lovel’s denial.

‘If I had any personal power, it would be because I love them, and perhaps they guess it. You don’t know what love a priest can feel for the people committed to his care.’

‘I wish you would feel a little love for yourself,’ exclaimed Paul impatiently. ‘It is getting on for nine o’clock, and I could stake my head that you haven’t had a bit of dinner.’

‘No more have you,’ as they strolled down the town together. ‘I was obliged to come—but what brought you?’

‘Doesn’t Kingsley say somewhere that he has “a reverent curiosity to die?” Well, I had the same sort of curiosity to see how a man like Ward would slip the hooks. Now, get in,’ as he hailed a hansom, and it drew up by the kerb-stone, ‘and I’ll drop you at your own door.’

When Mrs Clowser caught sight of Lovel’s face, like a sensible woman, she stopped the angry remonstrance which rose to her lips, pulled forward a comfortable arm-chair, and fetched him a glass of wine.

He drank it obediently, and then leant back in his chair, with closed eyes, whilst the widow hurried over her preparations for his supper.

## CHAPTER XXXI.

### CAPTAIN FITZGERALD MAKES A MOVE.

‘FITZ, I’m the most miserable girl alive!’ exclaimed Nellie, as she came into the conservatory, to tell her cousin that it was time to dress for dinner. She was looking very pretty in a simple black dress and sealskin jacket, which contrasted well with her fair complexion and sunny hair. The curls on her smooth white forehead were somewhat ruffled, for she had just pulled off her hat. They had only returned from Folkestone about an hour ago; but there was nothing in the short journey to tire her, and her blue eyes were as bright as ever.

Captain Fitzgerald, who had met them in London, and come down with them, regarded her critically.

‘Well, Nell,’ he said candidly, ‘in spite of that statement, you look pretty bobbish.’

‘Oh, I know,’ with an impatient flourish to the dainty hat she held in her hand. ‘If I hadn’t a hope in life, I should always look disgustingly healthy. But this is no joking matter. Fitz, don’t you see it for yourself?’ fixing her eyes upon his face, which still wore an expression of careless indifference.

'Can't say I do. Why are you so miserable? Because Aunt Tabby's temper is not divine?'

'Nonsense! As if I cared about myself!'

'No, you leave that for other people—ahem!'

She was too full of her subject even to deign to blush.

'You are all a set of blind bats,' with a little gasp. 'Can't you see that Maude is dying by inches?'

'Jove!' with a long breath. 'No, Nell; you go to such extremes! Fact is, she's cut up about her brother.'

'Doesn't she know that it's a thousand times better for him to be lying under the beeches, in Elmsfield churchyard, than going to the bad in London? No, it's not that,' shaking her small head dolefully. 'It's much worse.'

Captain Fitzgerald pulled his moustache, and let his cigarette gradually go out.

'Can't think what you mean. All danger from that fellow,' with a jerk of his head in the direction of The Chase, 'is over.'

'Oh! she won't have him, if you mean that; but it will kill her,' with tragic earnestness.

'Oh, hang it all! she isn't so far gone on him as all that. Why, she sent him about his business pretty sharp.'

'Yes—and she's never been the same girl since.'

Captain Fitzgerald frowned, for he had noticed Maude's depression himself, and had been jealously aware that it might have something to do with Sir Paul Nugent.

'I was staying with the Hussars at Colchester, a few days ago,' he said slowly; 'and, do you know, there are some uncommonly queer stories about

him in Essex. Anyone can see that he's got a fiend of a temper; and the story goes that he gave his wife a blow, or a push, which caused her death. Now, a man must be an utter ruffian to lay his hand on a woman. It's the lowest form imaginable.'

'I can't believe it, really. I've *tried* to, that's a fact. I wished to think him as horrid as possible; but he *is* such a beauty, and he's got such a way with him,' in a tone of the deepest regret.

'Oh, fudge and nonsense! He's not better looking than anybody else.'

'Oh, but he is; and if he has a temper, he controls it beautifully. I've made his eyes flash like a flame, but he never so much as waggled a little finger at me. Oh, Fitz, what *are* we to do?'

'Apply some other form of consolation,' he said with a smile; but his face was very grave a few minutes later, when Nellie left him, fuming and impatient, declaring he was no good at all.

There was a time when the guardsman's fancy had hovered like a butterfly over his two cousins, for Nellie's piquancy attracted him greatly, whilst Maude's statelier beauty compelled his admiration, but kept him at a distance. Although it would be unfair to call him a fortune-hunter, Gerald's disinheritance, which had made Maude heiress of Beechwood, gave her an additional charm in his anxious eyes. He had come to a pass when it was absolutely necessary to get funds from somewhere; and it naturally occurred to him that, to marry a girl with a large fortune, who had the extra advantages of being lovely to look at, and charming in character, was the best way out of his difficulties.

The Squire would look favourably on the match,

for he was desperately anxious to keep Beechwood in the family. Fitzgerald's mother was a Miss Dashwood ; and, if he consented to take the name, the old man would be quite satisfied. ' Fitzgerald-Dashwood ' would be rather a mouthful, but he was not inclined to stick at a trifle ; and, with Maude for his wife, and her fortune to back him, he thought he would not have much to complain of. It was absurd to think of Nugent standing in the way, for, as far as he could make out, he had been definitely refused ; and even, if he had the cheek to propose again, the Squire was the last man to tolerate a son-in-law, with an ugly story tacked to his name. And then he stood still amongst the flowers, and a softer look came over his face as he thought of the girl's purity and goodness ; and blushed to think what his own careless life would look to her, if they went through the future side by side. Fitzgerald was not worse than half the men in what is called ' good society,' but he was conscious that his standard was of the earth—earthy, and that it was a long distance from that to one amongst the stars. He started as his uncle came into the drawing-room dressed for dinner ; and, rushing through a side door, he dashed up the stairs, and forgot his sentimental perplexities whilst scrambling over his toilette.

He was unusually thoughtful at dinner, as Maude noticed ; and, fearing that he was in some trouble, she asked him later in the evening, to come into the conservatory and give his opinion on the new arrangement of the plants, in order that he might have an opportunity of telling her what it was. She was always eager to offer help and sympathy, and she turned to him with her most winning

smile, as soon as they were far enough from the others.

'What's the matter with you, Fitz?' she asked, in all unconsciousness.

Driven to the point in a hurry, he looked at her rather oddly.

'I think you ought to have guessed,' he muttered, under his moustaches.

He knew intuitively that the moment was not propitious; but he was in for it now, and it was impossible to draw back.

'You are hard up?' she said, with her soft, grey eyes resting calmly on his face, in a way that upset his composure.

'Oh, that's nothing new—but who told you?' he asked quickly, intensely annoyed at his want of disinterestedness being exposed, at the very moment when he wanted most to conceal it.

'Perhaps I guessed it,' with a playful smile. 'It is rather a common complaint amongst you soldiers, isn't it? But I'm very angry with you. Why do you treat us as if we didn't belong to you?'

'Haven't I been trying to make you belong to me for the last six months?' he blurted out, as the colour rushed into his face.

'I don't know how,' with a little laugh, as she picked a dead leaf from the stalk of a *Eucharis* lily. 'The best way to show that you think we do, is to let us help you when you are in a fix.'

'I want you to help me,' laying his hand on her shoulder, and looking down into her face. 'I've come to-night on purpose to ask you.'

'Well, Fitz, out with it! How much do you want? If I haven't enough, dear old dad can manage any amount. Don't be shy; am I not just like a sister?'

‘Nothing of the sort!’ he exclaimed, almost fiercely. ‘Maude, look at me. Don’t you know that I love you with my whole heart and soul?’

‘No, I don’t,’ with a slight drawing back of her small head. ‘Now please, Fitz, don’t be stupid. We’ve always understood each other, you know.’

‘You don’t understand me a bit,’ hotly. ‘You *will* have it that I’m thinking of money.’

‘And so we are, and talking of it too; and it’s a very necessary thing,’ speaking with unusual rapidity. ‘I don’t profess to despise it.’

‘No more do I; but I care for you more than for all the money in the bank. Maude, darling, won’t you have me at any price?’ bending over her till she felt his breath on her forehead.

‘No, Fitz, impossible. I’ve always been fond of you,’ she began, with intense pity in her eyes.

‘Yes, I swear you were, before that confounded infidel came between us,’ he broke out passionately, in the first bitterness of his disappointment. ‘I could have given you up to Lovel, or to any man that was worth his salt; but, ’pon my soul, that fellow—’

‘Don’t say any more,’ and she stood before him with flashing eyes and trembling lips, ten times more beautiful in her wrath than in her former indifference; ‘you could never have given me up, for you’d never have had me to give! But let us forget this nonsense.’

‘It isn’t nonsense; it has been the dream of my life.’

‘For how long?’ with a smile; ‘it was Nellie once.’

‘No, never,’ he affirmed, with audacious certainty. It has always been you; think over it, don’t give

me an answer to-day ; I can't face my life without you.'

'No use. If I thought over it till my hair grew white, it would make no difference.'

He gave a sigh which was almost a gasp.

'Tell me—is it Nugent?'

'It's yourself,' she said promptly ; 'I couldn't care for you in that sort of way, if there weren't another man in creation. Now, let me pass!'

'You're the cruellest girl I ever met,' he said sullenly.

'It's your own fault,' she began impatiently, for she was intensely annoyed with him ; but a feeling of compassion stole over her as she caught sight of his troubled face. 'Let us be friends, Fitz,' she said softly ; 'it won't do any good to quarrel.' The guardsman's better nature asserted itself, as he saw a tear rolling down the softness of her cheek, and the tenderest pity in her lovely eyes.

'All right,' he said hoarsely, with an attempt at a smile ; 'I wasn't half worthy of you ; and you knew it—more's the pity.' Then he took both her hands in his, and clasped them tight. He felt half wild as he looked down upon her in all her beauty, and recognised it as a fact that she would never be his ; but he bent his head without another word, touched her little hands gently with his fair moustaches, and then stepped aside to let her pass.

He told himself that the poetry of his life was over, and he must turn his mind to hard fact. Maude went slowly down the room, in the simple black evening-dress which accentuated the fairness of her arms and shoulders, and made her look like an alabaster statue dressed to represent a girl in the nineteenth century. He pulled his moustache



as if he meant to tug it up by the root as he watched her. With her vanished all his hopes of Beechwood ; and, whilst he only imagined his heart to be broken, he knew for a fact that his exchequer was. He had not asked his uncle for assistance, because he was afraid that he would never have him for a son-in-law if he knew of his debts, or guessed at his gambling proclivities ; and now, after proposing to his cousin, he was afraid of doing so, lest he should expose himself to the suspicion of being a fortune-hunter. But money he must have, and where was it to come from ? He was, as he expressed it, 'in a devil of a fix,' and the only angel he knew had refused to give him her hand to help him out of it. He thrust his hand into his pocket, and, in doing so, his fingers came in contact with an envelope which the butler had handed to him, as he came out of the dining-room. He had forgotten what the note was about ; but, as he pulled it out and read it, he found that it was an invitation to a small dance at the Castle, on the 19th, 'in honour of my sister's birthday.' A new idea flashed through his dejected mind. The Seldons were monied people ; Seldon *père* was one of the most successful merchants of the day. Josephine, bright, clever, and agreeable, would make a pleasant wife for any man ; and she was certain to bring a sufficient fortune with her, to compensate for the lost joys of bachelorhood. It was odd that he had allowed himself to be so engrossed by his cousin, or cousins, that he had never thought of her in that capacity. Rumour, it was true, gave her to Sir Paul Nugent. 'But deuce take it !' he exclaimed, with a frown, 'I'm not going to let the fellow block the line all round.'

Nellie gave him a glance as he sauntered into the room ; and, from his elaborate air of indifference, guessed, with a woman's quick perception, that he had worked himself up to a proposal, and met with a decided rejection. Perhaps it was her own fault, she thought remorsefully. She might have egged him on by her burst of confidence that very evening ; but, measuring him with her eyes, and critically studying his plain face and insignificant figure, she decided that he was fearfully conceited to think that he could fill a gap, left by a Paul Nugent.

Maude was sitting in a low chair by the fire, with a book on her lap, and her eyes on the fitful flames ; but, rousing herself with an effort as her cousin came into the room, she proposed a game of billiards.

'Ladies against gentlemen,' she said, with a smile. 'Father, you shall take Fitz ; and Nell and I will prepare to be beaten.'

'That would be only fair,' said Fitzgerald, in a low voice, 'if you beat us everywhere else.'

## CHAPTER XXXII.

‘THE LUCKIEST GIRL IN THE WORLD!’

HERBERT LOVEL lay awake half the night, after that last dreadful scene by the death-bed of James Ward. His conversation with Sir Paul Nugent was enough to disturb his mind, for it had been very hard on him to listen to his half-confidences about Maude Dashwood. His love for her was as full of passionate life as ever; for he had not thought it his duty to try to kill it, although he rigidly stifled all outward expression of it. He knew it for a beautiful thing in itself, for it was as pure as angels’ thoughts; and he cherished it in a deep corner of his heart, the door of which was locked to every other hand but his own. It had come upon him with the force of an electric shock that, in God’s providence, it was reserved for him to be the earthly means of bringing Paul Nugent to Christianity, and thereby leading him back to the girl who had once rejected him. He did not shrink from the task, or try to shift the burden of it on to Conway’s shoulders, as he might easily have done; but he had a hard fight with his lower self, before he could rise to the lofty heights which his higher self demanded. He knew it was a glorious task to win a soul to the true Faith; and he

called himself a selfish brute because he could not find it in him at first to rejoice that he was fitting Nugent, at the same time, to be Maude Dashwood's husband. Still, he was just as eager as ever to win his triumph over materialism ; and he would have gone up to The Chase the very next day, if a sudden failure of strength had not kept him a prisoner to the sofa. Ward's death had made a fearful impression on him, and he could not get the sight of his bloodshot, despairing eyes out of his mental vision. He tried to banish it by the brighter thought of the other men's promises of amendment ; but when the pulse is low, the darkest thoughts are always the most importunate.

It fretted him to be obliged to leave the burden of the parish on Conway's willing back, for there was always work enough for two, and consequently more than enough for one. But Charlie took it very cheerfully ; perhaps, because the two Miss Dashwoods had returned home the evening before, and appeared that morning at matins. Nellie's lively presence seemed to fill the whole air with a fresh supply of ozone ; and Hart's Alley had a touch of Eden about it, in spite of its filth and squalor, when her pretty little figure flitted from door to door.

Lovel had sent a message to Mrs Ward, and he stopped at No. 10 to deliver it. His knock obtained no answer, so he pushed open the door and looked in. The widow was sitting down, with her right elbow on the table, her thin face supported by her still thinner hand, as her dark, weary eyes looked up into Nellie Dashwood's. The contrast was vivid between the bright, fresh youth of the

girl, and the care-worn, tear-stained middle age of the woman. One looked the incarnation of youth and hope; the other had grown old and weary with looking for that which never came. Conway listened to the girl's sweet voice as she spoke a few words of kindly comfort, and then crept softly away, feeling sure that it must do Mrs Ward a wonderful amount of good only to look on that sweet, bright face, which seemed the prettiest in the world to him.

He arranged his visits in such a way that he was close to the end of the alley, when Nellie emerged into the High Street. He quickened his pace, and they walked on together—the one oblivious of the fact that Maude was to call for her in the carriage—the other perfectly conscious that he had not paid his visit to Mrs Ward, and that he would have to retrace his steps presently. It only meant another long walk, and wasn't Nellie Dashwood worth a small amount of fatigue?

The landau, with its pair of bright bays, reached the end of the alley at the appointed time, but George, the footman, informed his mistress that Miss Eleanor was walking down the street with Mr Conway.

'Oh! very well,' said Maude, with an imperturbable face, 'then drive to Burkin & Edwards.'

It was some time before she finished her shopping, and she was still so afraid of acting the part of a marplot, that she ordered the coachman to drive home by a different route to usual. Grey was anxious for his tea, and consequently ventured into a narrow lane, in order to avoid a longer round. This lane skirted the property of The

Chase ; and was, moreover, blocked by a cart belonging to its owner, laden with a heavy load of mangold-wurzel. It was impossible for the carriage to pass it, and equally impossible for the heavily-weighted cart-horse to hurry. It was an insult to the coachman's dignity to wait the pleasure of a common farm-cart, and the impatient bays seemed to resent it equally ; but Maude called out : ‘Never mind, Grey, there is no hurry,’ and leant back as if resigned to wait till night. But her patience was not to be tried, for Sir Paul Nugent's head, and the muzzle of the gun he was carrying, appeared over the hedge ; and in another minute the cart-horse was being led through a gate which he had opened, and the cart was creaking its way into a ploughed field. Then he came up to the carriage, and raised his hat.

‘So sorry that fool of a fellow stuck in your way, Miss Dashwood,’ he said, coldly and deferentially, as if he were speaking to a stranger. He was schooling himself to regard her as the promised wife of Captain Fitzgerald ; and if he rather overdid his part, it was simply because he was fighting against the impulse to seize her well-gloved little hand, nestling in her sealskin-muff, and ask her, if it was really all over with them for ever.

She only saw that his eyes were stern, his face pale and grave ; and she thought that he meant her also to see that all *was* over, because he had been drawn into an engagement with Josephine Seldon. She was afraid to speak lest her voice should betray her agitation by its huskiness, so she gave him what she considered a chilling bow, and the horses starting forward, she was carried away before she had time to recover herself.

He stood quite still, leaning on his gun, with his dogs at his feet, looking up the empty road, where the carriage had disappeared under the over-arching trees. She had loved him once—that he was as certain of as that he stood there—and the only barrier between them, then, was his unbelief. She could not guess that his intellect and his heart were gradually being convinced of the truth of most that he had denied; but he was the same *man* as he was on the day of the school-feast, and why her love had gone from him, he could not understand. She was not the sort of girl to love lightly, and forget as easily; and yet, a few months later, she was going to throw herself away on a man like Fitzgerald! There were only two alternatives to choose from. Either she must believe the scandalous stories circulated by Julia Goodwin, or else she must be sacrificing herself for the sake of her father, who, as Lord Mortimer said, wished to keep Beechwood in the family.

The farm-cart came again, with loudly creaking wheels, out of the ploughed field, and pursued its slow way up the steep lane, the dogs gave a few short, sharp barks as a gentle remonstrance against this delay, and Paul woke up out of his brown study to find the shadows deepening round him, and the white mists rising by the river.

He went home to his books and his deep researches, and determined to put Maude Dashwood out of his mind; whilst she returned to Beechwood with undried tears on her lashes, and a cold weight of depression on her heart, wondering if ever a man's love could be long and enduring as a woman's. As there were visitors in the drawing-room with Miss Wyngate, and she felt a craving

for solitude, she went into the morning-room, and was slowly drawing off her gloves by the fire, when Nellie came quickly into the room, and flung her arms impulsively round her neck, murmuring ecstatically, ‘I’m so happy, darling!’

In an instant Maude knew what had happened, and the contrast between her own lot and that of her cousin’s, smote her like a sudden blow. But she was full of tenderest sympathy at once. She took the small, blushing face in her two hands, and kissed it lovingly.

‘Is that wretched Charlie Conway going to steal you from me?’

‘I’ll never be far off, dear; but am I not the luckiest girl in the world?’ her eyes shining like twin stars.

‘I think the luck’s the other way.’ as she smoothed her ruffled curls.

This was rank heresy to Nellie, who deemed herself, with sweet humility, all unworthy of the man who had instructed her in the way of goodness, none the less well because he had taught her the lesson of love, at the same time. The cousins sat hand in hand on the sofa, whilst Nellie poured out her incoherent confessions as to her past hopes and fears, especially dwelling on that one miserable day in The Chase woods, when she thought that she had offended *him* for ever.

There were no difficulties in the way, for Charlie Conway was not dependent on the stipend he received from Dr Abbott; and the bride-elect had a small fortune of her own, over and above all that her uncle was likely to give her. Conway came of a good family, quite equal to the Dashwoods in point of birth: and it really seemed to Maude, as



if the most fastidious person could scarcely invent an objection to the marriage. Aunt Tabby might disapprove, because she was rather fond of frowning at everything at which Nellie most particularly smiled ; but she could have no plausible excuse for doing so, and Maude felt sure that the Squire would be delighted.

‘Dear old Nell ! You’ve drawn a lucky number in life’s lottery,’ she said brightly, as she leant back with an involuntary sigh.

‘Oh, what wouldn’t I give to make you as happy as I am !’ exclaimed Nellie, with a sudden regretful thought for the difference between their lots.

‘I have my dear old dad. I don’t want anyone else,’ she said quickly. ‘Oh, what a grand wedding you shall have, with Mr Lovel to perform the service over his two old friends, father to give you away, and the whole village to wish you joy ! It will be enough to turn Miss Daphne’s brain.’

There was great excitement in the house as soon as the engagement was announced, and Maude was expected to be in a flutter of delight over an event which was to rob her of her adopted sister. She acted her part well, so as to throw no cloud on Nellie’s happiness, but she was rather glad to be left to her own thoughts at last, after listening most patiently to her cousin’s blushing raptures. She looked out at the stars with a vague regret for what might have been ; but with no wild rebellion against the unfairness of fate, though the sunbeams and the roses were all for one, the shadows and the thorns for the other. She had done her duty bravely, and she was strong enough to endure the consequences without grumbling.

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### JULIA GOODWIN'S REVENGE.

THE news of the engagement was brought to The Chase by Conway himself, and Paul Nugent congratulated him cordially. Whilst he was sitting opposite to him, he remembered that the living of D— was in his gift, and that the Rector's health was said to be shaky. Charlie's face flushed when he made the suggestion that he should fill the post as soon as it was vacant; and he admitted that he should feel more worthy of Miss Dashwood, if he were a rector instead of a curate.

'But wouldn't it be hard lines on Lovel? He deserves it ten times better than I do.'

'No, Lovel must not leave Elmsfield. Dr Abbott ought to resign. I like the idea of sticking to a living in England, whilst he spends half the year at Monte Carlo!' exclaimed Paul scornfully.

'Cannes,' suggested Conway, with a smile. 'For Heaven's sake, don't spread the report that he gambles. You know he detests the cold.'

'Let him detest it, I've no objection. Let him talk twaddle, and drink weak tea with all the interesting invalids on the Riviera; only don't let him take the pay of a rector, whilst other people do all the work.'

'We don't mind it,' said Conway cheerfully, 'as long as he allows us to do as we like.'

'Oh, you don't mind anything under present circumstances, but, meanwhile, Lovel ruins his health, and you will be the next to knock up.'

'Not I ; but I must be off,' standing up, and picking up his hat.

'Are you going to this dance on the 19th ?'

'No ; don't know what Lord Mortimer means by giving it in Advent. Come, and see Lovel. He wants to have a talk.'

'Ah, so do I,' very gravely. 'Did you notice how Elsmere said he never went deep enough, implying, that the more you knew, the less you believed? Now, I find it quite the other way.'

'Of course you do. We've nothing to hide. If you go deep enough you will only find the truth, and see it more clearly than you ever did before. But if you only trust to the negative speculatists, you will easily get fogged ; and that's what he did, evidently. Ah, Nugent,' with a radiant smile, 'you'll never be as happy as I am to-day, until you believe all that I do.'

'I shall never be as happy as you, that's certain, with a touch of bitterness.

'You don't know what a difference it makes,' Conway said, in a low voice, 'to know that your hearts are being lifted to Heaven on the same prayers, to kneel at the same altar in the same hope and faith. That makes you feel "one," more than anything else.'

Paul did not answer, but the hand which was resting on the other's shoulder pressed it convulsively.

'I oughtn't to talk to you like that,' Charlie

went on rather penitently, 'but I did hope it would be the same with you, some day.'

'I've noticed that men in your condition want all their friends to be attacked by the same malady, but I warn you that I'm a hopeless subject,' Paul said, with a short laugh. And then he turned to a box of cigarettes, and told the Curate to fill his case, as they weren't a bad lot which he had got through a friend fresh from the East.

Conway went home thoughtfully, his glad content rather subdued, for the moment, by the fear that something had gone wrong with his friend. It had seemed a perfect programme that he should marry the younger Miss Dashwood ; whilst Nugent should turn Christian just in time to espouse the elder. But there had been a mistake somewhere, and it was evident that only the first part of the programme could be carried out. The next moment, he threw his hat up into the air like an irresponsible schoolboy, as he thought of the living of D—, and imagined his girlish bride already installed there. What had he done to deserve all this happiness ? he asked humbly of his inner self. He wasn't half so good as Lovel ; and yet the sweetest girl in the world was content to take him for better and for worse !

Paul threw himself down on a chair near a table covered with books, and pulled some of them wearily towards him. He was tired of thinking, for his brain was continuously at work. He could scarcely sleep at night for the questions which were always agitating it ; and yet they *must* be answered. They were more important than anything else ; and yet how many men who were most exact in business matters went on carelessly,

leaving them all unanswered. He had heard from Mark Ferrol that morning, who wrote to say that he was going to run down for a few days, and mentioned as a true story, told him the day before, that a clergyman of the Church of England had given up his orders, with a view to marrying the lovely daughter of a rabid Unitarian. He ended with a sneer: 'And then, they have the face to deny that their religion is all humbug!'

'Well, they can't say of me that I'm changing my views, in order to marry the lovely daughter of anybody,' was Paul's comment. 'Alone I shall live and die, whether I believe in a God—or in nothing.'

He did not want Ferrol, but he could not bear to tell him so, for he had given him a running invitation; and it would seem such a snub if he put him off without assigning any reason. And yet he knew that his old friend would do his best to unsettle him, and that he would have to fight the whole battle again before he was properly equipped for it. Ferrol would laugh at revelation, scoff at the idea of a spiritual world which was beyond the range of science, and talk glibly of the way in which miracles were manufactured to satisfy the craving for the wonderful, in a credulous age. Paul felt so dispirited and disheartened that he determined to go for a long ride to refresh himself, and to call in at Elmsfield Lodge on his way home, for a bracing talk with Lovel.

As he dismounted at the Lodge, and entrusted his thoroughbred to the care of Mrs Clowser's hopeful son, he was not aware that Miss Julia Goodwin was staring at him from a chink in the venetian blind. She could see his face in the

bright moonlight, with its clear-cut features, as well as the outline of his tall, well-knit figure, and hear every word that he said, as he spoke cheerily to the boy; and she clasped her hands in a thrill of involuntary admiration. She had always thought him handsomer than any man she had ever seen, and she had liked his clear, rich voice better than any other that she had ever heard. But when he married Perdita Verschoyle, she tried to change her opinion, in the same way as she endeavoured to metamorphose her hopeless attachment into practical hatred. In both she had failed, for Paul, whatever he did, or thought, or said, always remained the same outwardly; and it was by his outward appearance, alone, that he had won her shallow heart. In this she had agreed with poor Perdita; for she was equally incapable of appreciating his mental qualities. The little mind she possessed was fed upon the romances in penny weekly papers, in which lonely spinsters are often depicted as enjoying the most sudden elevations of stations; and she had deluded herself into the idea that she might frighten Sir Paul into asking her to be Lady Nugent, if she threatened to spread her version of his wife's death through the neighbourhood round The Chase. She forgot that these heroines are invariably young and lovely, and she also failed to remember that her intended victim was not the sort of man, on whom fear could act as a motive power; and she planted herself in Elmsfield, with the sweetest of hopes budding in her virgin breast. Sir Paul had disliked her from the first, because of her ridiculous admiration for himself; but his passive dislike rose to active loathing, when he found that she had such a deteriorating

influence on his wife. At The Thickets he had only tolerated her for the sake of her brother, but now that he was dead, and she had come to Elmsfield to disturb his peace, he threw toleration to the winds, and kept her at a determined distance by his evident contempt. If a woman of an 'uncertain age' is weak enough to fall in love, the passion takes entire possession of her, and neither separation nor want of appreciation on the part of the object, has any effect upon it. This ill-favoured, unrefined, middle-aged spinster, who had raised Paul Nugent on to a pedestal and elected to worship him whether he would or no, had vowed by all the gods, that, if he would not marry Julia Goodwin, he should not marry Maude Dashwood. It was with this object, that she had told her story of the tragedy at The Thickets to the Miss Singletons and Nellie Dashwood, holding back the fact that Mrs Nugent was not sober, which would have helped to exonerate her husband from all blame. She relied instinctively on his sense of honour for keeping his mouth shut; and so took a mean advantage of his higher nature, which yet did not shock her lower one. It seemed as if her plans were succeeding, for she never saw Sir Paul Nugent riding past with Miss Dashwood as she used to; and, according to public report, the Squire's nephew was said to be the favoured suitor.

Yes, her revenge was prospering; but not her happiness. If Sir Paul remained a disconsolate widower, she would be an equally disconsolate spinster; and, as she sat by the fire, with a bit of crotchet in her fingers, she was terribly conscious of the fact that she had made no friends, and won

no affection. If she died that night, there would not be a single person to mourn her, except, perhaps, Louisa, her maid-of-all-work, who would be doubtful as to her wages. Whilst she was estimating the worth of her servant's attachment, Louisa knocked at the door in a state of agitation.

'Mother had got the spasms, and she must go at once.'

'Go off!' exclaimed Miss Goodwin, dropping her crochet-needle. 'Go off, and leave me alone, to be murdered by the first burglar? It's not to be thought of.'

'Lor', mum!' exclaimed the girl, in high disdain, 'tain't worth a burglar's while to come after trumpery plated forks; and with two parsons next door.'

'There are not two. One of them's ill, the other is spending the evening at Beechwood; and, besides, who knows but what I mightn't have more than a dressing-gown on, and my hair all in curl-papers; and how could I ever face them in the pulpit after that? No, Louisa, you must positively wait till to-morrow,' her mistress said, with decision.

But Louisa refused to wait, and half-an-hour later was hurrying down the road to Elmersbridge, to assist at the spasmodic attacks of a factory-woman who happened to be her mother; and her mistress was left alone, to decide at her leisure whether it would be better to sacrifice effect for a certain to-morrow, for the sake of an uncertain burglar that night. If she sacrificed her curl-papers to a sense of the becoming, there would be no curl in her hair the next day. The problem exercised her brain for some time.

Whilst Miss Goodwin was puzzling her mind



over the intricacies of her toilette, Charlie Conway was spending his evening in the full enjoyment of Miss Eleanor Dashwood's society, without a care in his happy heart. The Squire had welcomed him kindly as a 'nephew-in-law,' and if Miss Wyn-gate had not been quite so cordial, he was grateful to her for not being the reverse. Maude said she would have found it harder to give up her 'sister' to anyone else, and wished them joy with her sweetest smile; and then she did the kindest thing, for she left them alone together as often as she could. For a long time she sat at the piano, playing her father's favourite airs; and then she went into the conservatory, and wandered about amongst the flowers. Her thoughts naturally reverted to Captain Fitzgerald, who had departed the morning after his rejection, with an expression got up for the part of a rejected lover. She could not feel much pity for him, as she thought the matter over, for she could not make herself feel sure of the depth of his affection. His tones and looks were so different to Paul Nugent's when she was almost carried off her feet, mentally, by the electric impulse of his own agitation. Fitz would console himself easily, she thought, with a slightly disdainful smile, as she halted on the step of the conservatory, one white arm upraised as she held back the lace curtain. The Squire's head was resting against the cushioned back of his chair, with the firelight playing on his aquiline profile. His eyes were closed, his gold spectacles, dropping off the tip of his nose, would soon descend on the *Globe*, which was lying unread on his knee. Opposite to him was Aunt Tabby, with her pointed nose nodding over her knitting-needles, in

the tranquil happiness of a surreptitious doze. And the lovers were a little apart, Conway's dark head very near to Nellie's golden-brown one. They were not talking fast; but what was left unsaid by the tongue, was spoken most eloquently by two pairs of blue eyes. There was an undercurrent of peace and happiness in the scene, which seemed like a rest to Maude's troubled mind; and she was stepping down into the room, when Markham, the butler, burst into it in an unceremonious fashion. She could not hear exactly what was said, something about 'Fire—Miss Goodwin's—Mr Lovel—and Sir Paul Nugent!'

The Squire woke with a start, Miss Wyngate cried out a terrified '*What?*' Charlie Conway sprang to his feet, Nellie sat still with a white face. Then Conway said, in a tone of horror, 'Not dead? You don't mean that Sir Paul is dead?'

And the butler answered distinctly: 'Yes, sir—they say it's all up with him.'

There was a crash at the end of the room, and Maude Dashwood lay slantwise across a Persian mat, like a lovely white statue fallen from its base, before Nellie could bound to the spot with outstretched arms ready to save. She would have died rather than confess her love openly; but Nature was too strong for her, and flung her down before the eyes of her family, a mute, but irrefragable witness, to the depth of her affection for poor Paul Nugent.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### SIR PAUL TO THE RESCUE.

LOVEL persuaded Sir Paul to dine with him, and he stayed till ten o'clock. As soon as he got outside the gate, he noticed a red glare in the sky, and went into the middle of the road to see where it came from. There was no difficulty in discovering the cause, for a tongue of flame shot up from the back of Laburnum Lodge, and made a red streak against the dark shadow of the beeches. He shouted out to Lovel to warn him of what was happening, and told young Clowser to get on his horse, and ride 'like mad' into Elmersbridge to fetch the engine. He then ran to get a ladder which he knew was kept in the shed, and hurried with it to Miss Goodwin's. He hammered at the door, and called out at the top of his voice, but the house was wrapt in profound silence. There was not a sound of any kind but the crackling of the flames; and every door was barred and bolted, and every window on the ground floor, secured with shutters. If Julia Goodwin was inside, she must be either stupefied by the smoke, or dead.

'Our only chance is that window up there,' Lovel said, pointing to a bow-window on the first

floor. 'It has no shutters, and is large enough for you to get through.'

'You oughtn't to be here ; go back,' said Paul earnestly, as he planted the foot of the ladder in the soft earth of a flower-bed.

'All right, I'll see the poor woman safe first. God help her ! she must be dead with fright.'

There was a crash of broken glass, and the next moment, Paul found the fastening, and, raising the sash, jumped into the room. Its emptiness puzzled him, for it was evidently the best bedroom of the small house. He got his cigar lights ; and, striking one, looked round. The bed, an old-fashioned four-poster, was untenanted, but there were combs and brushes on the toilette-table, and the corner of a plate-basket protruded from under the vallance. He could not guess that Miss Goodwin, in her horror of burglars, had put everything valuable in the front room, in order to tempt them ; and then chosen to pass the night in the back room, as she valued her life more than her property. The door was locked as a further precaution ; and, as it chanced, every precaution she had taken for her own safety, made it all the more difficult to save her. Nugent succeeded in breaking it open, and, as he did so, thought he heard Lovel's voice from the window ; but there was no time to lose, for the little landing was already enveloped in smoke. He knew that he would soon be asphyxiated by it, if it got down his throat, so he waited to tie his pocket-handkerchief over his mouth and the tip of his nose. He could see nothing, but he felt his way down two steps, then up another couple, till he reached a door. It was locked like the other, and he could not throw himself upon it with any im-

petus, because of the narrowness of the landing. But he was possessed of great muscular strength, and the desperation of the moment increased it; and, after one or two attempts, the hinges gave way and the door burst open. The smoke was dense, but reddened by the glare of the flames which had seized upon everything near the fireplace, and already destroyed every vestige of a curtain. The heat was intolerable, and the boards of the floor were giving way under his feet as he groped his way to the bed, hoping to find it empty. But it was *not* empty. His fingers, as he passed them rapidly over the pillow, came in contact with something that he was certain was a human face. An odd sort of thrill went through him, for he was convinced that Julia Goodwin must be dead. A puff of wind came from the now empty framework of the window, and, as the smoke cleared, he caught a glimpse of the woman he was trying to take in his arms, and that glimpse photographed the oddest-looking object on his brain. He covered her up in blankets, and made a dash for the door, but, confused by the smoke, he missed the opening, and beat wildly against the wall. The delay of one minute might be fatal; the flames were already scorching him, and throwing out red tongues as if to catch hold of him and draw him back—the ceiling was dropping on his uncovered head—the boards on which he stood were breaking up—a weight like a ton was on his heaving chest. He shifted the heavy bundle on to his left arm, and stretched out his right. He felt a piece of wood, and found it was the door which was propped against the wall. This must be close to the opening. His head was swimming; he heard a voice calling him, but could

not tell if it was far or near. With a desperate effort, he gathered his confused senses together. Safety was so close at hand, it would be such folly to miss it! He staggered forward.—‘Here! here!’ he tried to call, but the handkerchief over his mouth nearly choked him.—Somebody caught hold of the blanket, and dragged the helpless bundle from his arms.—Somebody tried to catch him by the shoulder; but at the same moment the floor gave way with a crash, and he felt himself going backwards, like a drowning man into a sea of flame!

The flames leapt up to the ceiling as if in triumph, and shone upon Lovel’s face, blanched with sudden horror.

‘O God! have mercy!’ he exclaimed brokenly, as he saw the ugly gaping hole where the floor had been the instant before, and looked on the point of madly jumping into it in search of his friend.

‘Are you mad?’ cried Dr Hicks hoarsely. ‘He has fallen through. Come downstairs.’

Downstairs as fast as they could get there, with a terrible fear chilling the blood in their veins. The door of the little dining-room had been broken open by the villagers, who had been very active in dragging out the furniture; but they made a general stampede when the ceiling fell in, not caring to risk their lives for ‘a pack of rubbish.’ Lovel pressed forward through the startled groups, and was the first to gain the doorway. There was a heap of burnt plaster, charred wood, and burning fragments on the floor, and half-covered up by them—was Sir Paul Nugent; his head was pillowed on his right arm, which had broken under him, and, to judge by the calm beauty of his face, he might

have been sleeping as peacefully as a child, amidst the wreck and confusion of a ruined house. Lovel looked down upon him for an instant, with a choking sob in his throat. Was this to be the end of a life which, only a few hours before, seemed to be approaching its zenith? Thrown away—absolutely thrown away—for the sake of a woman who had slandered him!

‘Coom away, coom away, sir; that’s no safe place for you to be in,’ a gardener called out from the passage; ‘you’ll be havin’ the whole house atop of you.’

‘Come and lend us a hand,’ said Lovel quickly, as he tried to raise the heavy body with Hicks’s help. ‘We must get him out of here as fast as we can.’

Several men came forward, though they had shrunk the moment before from the job; but they weren’t going to shirk when the parson led the way, as they told their wives when they got home. They had to be as quick as they could, for there was imminent danger of the roof falling in, and a constant shower of little bits of flaming wood was coming from above. A sudden silence fell upon the crowd outside, as they drew back to leave a clear path for Sir Paul and his bearers. Out into the cold white moonlight—out into the cool night air, from the stifling smoke and the fierce hot flames; but neither heat nor cold made any difference to the man they were carrying, for in the midst of the anxious, excited crowd, there was no peace except in his calm, still face.

A small figure darted forward in a long cloak.

‘Take him to our house. Our spare bedroom’s

ready. For mercy's sake don't drag him that long way to The Chase !'

Lovel hesitated.

'He had better come to us. Why should we trouble you?'

'No trouble at all,' said Miss Singleton earnestly. 'My sister and I will nurse him, night and day. And excuse me—Miss Goodwin has been taken to your house, so you will have no room.'

'Just as you please, it won't be for long.'

How quickly a woman forgets a cause of offence, when the man with whom she is angry falls into trouble ! When James Ward was ill, his wife forgot years of ill-usage at his hands ; and as soon as Paul Nugent was injured and helpless, the two old ladies dismissed all prejudice from their minds, and were ready to receive him with tenderest compassion.

The bearers came slowly along the white road, past the grey tower of the little church, through the open garden gate, under the porch which in summer time was a bower of roses. They struggled up the narrow staircase as best they could, squeezed through the doorway, and laid their heavy burthen on the snow-white bed—and all the while he never spoke or stirred. Miss Daphne was waiting with cotton-wool, carron oil, and every remedy she could find ; but, 'He won't want any of them,' was her sad reflection, as she looked at the long, helpless limbs, the white, calm face, beautiful as an Apollo Belvedere—and as lifeless !



## CHAPTER XXXV

### ONE GOOD TURN DESERVES ANOTHER.

WHEN it was too late to do any good but save the surrounding trees, the Elmersbridge fire-engine dashed up to the scene of action. As soon as they got their hose into working order, the men began playing vigorously on all that remained of Laburnum Lodge; and after a time checked the flames, which had been having it their own way for so long. The Squire and Charlie Conway arrived as fast as two horses could bring them, and, having heard contradictory reports from everyone who came up to them, rode off to Ivy Cottage. Lovel, looking like a walking ghost, gave them a brief account of what had happened. He told them that Sir Paul was alive, but so frightfully injured that Hicks feared the worst. Miss Goodwin was still unconscious, but he thought it possible that she might pull through.

‘Just because nobody cares a hang whether she lives or dies!’ said Mr Dashwood moodily; and Conway’s heart echoed the words as he thought of Maude Dashwood. Why was her life to be spoilt by the loss of a man like Paul Nugent, when a useless creature like Julia Goodwin was

left to cumber the earth? It did seem so hard and cruel to finite understandings!

Lovel, who was utterly done for, was packed off to bed, owing to Conway's urgent representations. The Squire waited to see the fire extinguished, and the crowd dispersed; and then rode home at a good pace, because he knew that his daughter, to whom he had already sent, was waiting for him with breathless eagerness for the details. Charlie stayed at Ivy Cottage to share the night-watch with Miss Daphne, and thought the dawn would never break. Dr Hicks hovered between the two houses, because both the patients required constant vigilance. At eight o'clock in the morning he telegraphed to London for further advice, and a celebrated surgeon came down by the first express. Besides the broken arm, there were terrible burns on the legs; and, besides all of these, he was afraid of an injury to Nugent's spine. The verdict was not absolutely hopeless; but it gave only the tiniest strand for the most sanguine to hold by. He went over to see Miss Goodwin, shook his head solemnly, and came out. For this he would take no fee, which was magnanimous of him, for a doctor's shake of the head has been known to be very expensive. Two days later, Maude Dashwood was surprised to hear that Miss Goodwin wanted to speak to her. She ordered the pony-carriage and drove down at once, for a message from a death-bed was imperative. As she passed the small house where Sir Paul lay dying, she cast a wistful glance up at the windows. Miss Daphne, who had misjudged him, and never cared for him, was allowed to nurse him, but even that solace was denied to the one that loved him better than all

the world. She shuddered as she looked at the blackened ruins of Laburnum Lodge. There it was that he had thrown away his life in trying to rescue the woman, who had injured him. She felt an involuntary repulsion to Julia Goodwin; but her dislike changed into pity when she saw her deathly face. The corkscrew ringlets had vanished, as well as the affected simper, and the florid colouring had changed into a sickly paleness. Altogether, the alteration was so great that Maude stood still, silently studying her with her large grey eyes, and wondering if she really were Julia Goodwin, or somebody else who had stolen her name.

‘I’ve got to die,’ said Julia hoarsely, as Louisa, who was sitting by her side, left the room. ‘It does seem hard, in the prime of life, doesn’t it? But it’s no use making a fuss.’

‘No, we must all go when we are called,’ said Maude softly, as she took the seat which Louisa had just vacated.

‘It was kind of Sir Paul to take all that trouble to save me, and one good turn deserves another. We were friends once. I wasn’t a bad-looking girl,’ with a ghastly smile.

‘You knew his wife?’

‘Yes; I knew her, poor thing. Was that what you came here for?’ eyeing the sad, sweet face with suspicious eyes.

‘I came because you sent for me.’

‘Ah, I forgot.’ There was a pause, during which she seemed to be collecting her scattered thoughts. A scarlet shawl with a yellow border, which was thrown over her shoulders, seemed to intensify the bloodless look of her face. ‘I’ve never liked you, my dear,’ stretching out her hand, which, even

then, was bedizened with trumpery rings; 'perhaps because *he* did.'

'How could you tell?' exclaimed Maude brokenly, as the blood rushed to her cheeks.

'I knew because I had a fancy for him myself; I don't mind now. Did you hear them say that he killed his wife?'

Maude drew back, and her eyes flashed indignantly.

'I knew it for a wicked lie!'

'Did you ever ask him?' watching her closely.

'No, but my father did. He thought it only fair that these stories should be stopped.'

'He wasn't satisfied?' still with her beadlike eyes fixed on Maude's face. 'It was a strange thing for a gentleman to knock a lady down.'

'But he didn't,' eagerly, 'and you know he didn't. She put her hand on his arm and he shook it off, that was all.' The explanation had not satisfied the Squire, because he naturally concluded that if the poor girl fell in consequence of her husband's action, that action must be too rough for any gentleman to use towards a woman; but he could get nothing more out of Sir Paul, who seemed to resent his questions. 'Oh, if you know anything more, tell me, for God's sake,' she said earnestly. 'He must be cleared before he dies.'

'Will he die? Dear! how empty the world will be!' exclaimed the insignificant lonely spinster, whose small horizon had been filled by that one figure.

'And he will have died for you,' in a low voice.

'Don't!' shrinking together as if appalled by the thought. 'There was a time when I'd have thrown myself under his horse's hoofs, only to get a smile.

And now, I'll do something for him,' raising herself on her elbow. 'Listen to me, Miss Dashwood, that man's the truest gentleman that ever walked the earth. Not to save himself from suspicion, would he say that his dead wife was a drunkard. She wasn't sober, she was that unsteady on her legs that the slightest touch sent her over. My brother, the doctor who attended her, knew the truth, and told me never to forget it.'

'And you kept it to yourself, and spread the other story, knowing it was false?' her heart throbbing with indignation.

'I am a poor, miserable woman,' sinking back and puckering up her face, as she began to sob. 'But I've made amends. Tell everybody; let the people at the Castle know. I shall be gone, so it won't matter.'

The crass selfishness of the woman who had held her tongue until she knew that speaking would do her no harm, disgusted Maude almost more than her malice; but she could not abuse her on her death-bed, so she stood up and fastened her sable boa round her throat to show that she was going.

Julia Goodwin looked up at her tall figure and beautiful face, with unwilling admiration. This was the girl whom Sir Paul loved!

'Good-bye,' she said huskily. 'Tell him that I told you.'

'Too late! I shall never speak to him again.'

The emotion which she had kept under control broke forth as she uttered the words which pierced her own heart; and she hurried from the room, her breast heaving with a tempest of sobs. The sound of her sobs reached Herbert Lovel, who was sitting in his small study with the door ajar. He got up

quietly, and pulled it to, knowing with instinctive delicacy that any overt sympathy would be an intrusion. He listened to every sound of her footsteps, or the rustling of her dress ; but he let her go out to the carriage unattended, because he was so certain that she would prefer it. This sin-stained earth would have seemed a reflex of Heaven, if his love could have sheltered her small brown head from the overhanging cloud of sorrow ; but, instead of that, he had to keep it under lock and key, and ignore its existence, a pain to comfort, and no comfort to her !

## CHAPTER XXXVI.

### MATERIALISM CONQUERED.

IT was Christmas Eve, and a few white flakes were hovering between earth and sky, as Lovel sat by Sir Paul Nugent's bedside. The room was filled with hot-house flowers which had come from the Castle, as well as Beechwood ; and a bright fire burnt in the small, old-fashioned grate. A crimson plush *portière*, provided by Lady Mortimer, hung over the door ; whilst a screen, which had been sent down in the Squire's name, kept off the draught from the window. The bed was covered with a crimson silk quilt, worked many years ago by Miss Daphne's skilful fingers ; and the invalid's tired head was resting on a pillow, carefully embroidered by Miss Priscilla, when her sight was strong, and her heart young.

'I sent for you, Lovel,' said Sir Paul, in a low, weak voice, which was scarcely recognisable as his own, 'because I didn't know how many days I had to live, and I could find no peace till I relieved my mind.'

'Don't excite yourself more than you can help, but tell me anything that troubles you.'

'I wanted something firm to hold by, and I could never find it. Science is always shifting her

ground; one theory supplants another, as one system of philosophy uproots another—I found no rest for my mind anywhere.’

‘I can well believe it. Outside Christianity, the sands are always shifting.’

Lovel said no more to urge the other onward; for he had determined that, if Nugent were ever converted to Christianity, it should be a conversion of reason, and not only of emotion.

‘Then came your sermon. Do you remember it? It made an impression on me that I can never forget. “Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.” That seemed to give me all I wanted.’ He waited for a minute with a rapt expression on his face, and then went on slowly, ‘Strange! to think that for all these years I’ve ignored the spiritual world, and yet now it seems as clear to me as the other. I made a god of matter, and thought, with Tyndall, that “it had in it the potency and promise of all life.”’

‘You forgot what Kant said, “Give me matter, and I will explain the formation of a world.” I don’t agree with him there, but he goes on to confess, “Give me matter only, and I cannot explain the formation of a caterpillar.” And why couldn’t he? Because there is no such thing as spontaneous generation. Behind the caterpillar, is the God who made it, and gave it life.’

‘It is very simple when you come to think of it. If God made everything, there is no difficulty anywhere. Sin was always a puzzle to my mind, though, and I was never satisfied with Renan’s calm, “*Mais je le supprime.*” — That explained nothing.’

‘No; but when you consider that God made



man, and man brought sin into the world, it is natural to suppose that a merciful God would think of some scheme of redemption.'

'That poor woman Ward taught me to think of a "Land of Compensation." She seemed so cocksure that all was made up to her boy, in another world. And then again, if God is Almighty, I can't see any difficulty in miracles. Surely the one who made the laws of nature, could unmake them if He chose.'

'Of course He could. Miracle is the way in which a moral God would naturally show himself to man; as one of our opponents has been driven to acknowledge. There is an enormous chasm between the acts of mercy recorded of our Lord, "when the dumb spoke, and the leper was healed," and the so-called miracles, trumped up for political purposes by the Roman priests and augurs. Besides which, the people who were cured were living witnesses of His power. But I'm afraid I'm tiring you,' breaking off suddenly.

'No, you are not. I haven't time to go into all the questions that worry me. How does the branch of the Church to which you belong, stand, with regard to the others? Just tell me that.'

'We occupy the *via media* between those who have given up too much, and those who have gone too far. Romanists turn our doctrine of the Real Presence, which has come down to us from the time of the Apostles, and has the authority of the *whole primitive Church*, into that of Transubstantiation. They take our reverent remembrance of the saints on the days of their festivals, and expand it into something near worship of men and women

like ourselves. Not content with the one Blessed Redeemer, they call upon the Holy Virgin, and the saints and martyrs, to intercede for them. These are a few instances of our points of difference. I won't bother you with all.'

'It is a grand thought to belong to the Church which Christ founded,' was Paul's only comment; for he had not followed Lovel's last words very closely. 'Lovel, I should like to be baptised before I die. Is there any reason against it?'

Lovel's heart bounded as he stretched out his hand, and laid it softly on Nugent's wasted fingers.

'This is what I have prayed for,' he said gently. 'Do you believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost?'

'I do,' solemnly.

'Do you believe in the redemption by Jesus Christ?'

'I do.'

'Do you believe in the Holy Catholic Church, founded by the Lord Jesus?'

'I do.'

'Then will you join with me in prayer?'

The colour rushed into Paul's pale face, as he bent his head in sign of assent. He could not even fold his hands, for his right arm was still useless in its sling. But an expression came into his face which had never been there before, as Lovel dropped on his knees, and his lips followed every word he said.

A long silence fell on the room when the prayer was ended. Then the Curate stood up, and, picking up his hat, said earnestly,—

'You are sure you are not acting on a sudden impulse? You may recover, and the vows you

will take will be binding on you for the rest of your life. Remember that.'

'I know. I shall try to keep them to the best of my ability. Don't be afraid ; my conversion is the result of conviction. My reason is satisfied, as well as my heart.'

'Would you care to have any witnesses? It is not necessary, but you can if you like.'

'Three people have influenced me by their lives ; I should like them all to be here—Conway, and you, and Miss Dashwood,' he said slowly, 'if you don't think she would mind, or Fitzgerald object.'

'Fitzgerald would have nothing to do with it. He will never be more than a cousin.'

'He's not going to marry her?' he asked, with a catch in his breath.

'No—*you* ought to have known better than that,' Lovel said hurriedly, as he purposely turned away, and looked at the falling snow.

A sudden light flashed from Nugent's eyes, but he said nothing. The deathly whiteness of his face, and the quick throbbing of his heart, were the only signs of his agitation. Oh, to feel that life was slipping from him, when the joy that he most prized was almost within his grasp! The thought upset all his tranquillity. He had been so thankful to find rest in the bosom of the true Faith, that he had been quite content to die, and test the truth of his new-born hopes. Life during these last few days had seemed such a paltry thing compared with immortality, that it had cost him but few pangs to give it up. His constant gropings after light had forced him upward to the doors of Heaven ; and now the thought of Maude Dashwood

being within his reach dragged him back, with a sudden shock, to earth.

‘You are tired now,’ said Lovel, struck with his appearance of exhaustion, and the beads of cold sweat upon his forehead. ‘Think it all over, and send for me at any moment. We shall both be in the church this afternoon before evensong, putting up the decorations, and Miss Dashwood is almost certain to be there. You don’t know what a comfort this morning’s talk has been to my mind.’

Paul could only muster strength enough for a tired smile; and Herbert Lovel hurried out to find Miss Daphne, and ask her to take the invalid some restorative.

He could scarcely credit that his work was already accomplished—the mission he had received from Gerald Dashwood’s dying lips. The once careless Christian had made his small effort at the last, and Lovel was cheered to think of it. He was so absorbed with his own thoughts that he noticed neither the snowflakes, which were turning his clerical coat into a long white garment, nor the Mortimers’ carriage, till the Countess put her head out of the window, and called out to him. Thus arrested, he stopped unwillingly to speak to her; and, taking off his hat, went up to the carriage. Josephine Seldon was sitting by her sister, looking anxious and subdued; and opposite to her was Mark Ferrol, whom Lord Mortimer had met in the train coming down to keep his former engagement with Sir Paul Nugent, and had insisted on carrying off to the Castle. The birthday dance never came off; but Mr Ferrol was found such a pleasant addition to the family party, that his host and hostess persuaded him to

stay over Christmas. He was very much perturbed about his friend, and often came over to ask after him; but the invalid was rarely able to see him.

'Any better news?' Lady Mortimer asked anxiously.

'He had a bad night, and looks rather done up this morning.'

'Would he see me, do you think? It must be dull work for him, with only those two old ladies to look after him.'

'They have made model nurses,' said Lovel, with an amused smile, 'and I'm afraid, Lady Mortimer, you would be too exciting.'

'Well, I won't be kept out for ever. I will come and cheer him up as soon as he is moved on to a sofa,' she rejoined resolutely.

Josephine leant forward with a slightly flushed face.

'Don't let him think that we go on just the same without him. The dance was put off, and everything else.'

'Let him know that I would be only too proud to do anything for him,' said Ferrol eagerly. 'I could talk to Harcourt, you know, and see after the place a bit.'

'You are awfully good. I'll be sure and tell him.' Then he lifted his hat again; and the carriage went on its way, past the blackened heap of brickwork, which had once been Laburnum Lodge, into Elmersbridge, where the two sisters were bent on a Lady Bountiful expedition to Hart's Alley.

'Do you know that pretty girl Nellie Dashwood is going to throw herself away on Mr Conway?

Lady Mortimer inquired, with a suddenness that rather startled Mark Ferrol.

‘The parsons get all the slices of cake,’ he answered moodily, for he considered the matter beyond a joke.

‘Not Mr Lovel,’ put in Josephine quietly.

‘He’s safe to have a bishopric some day, and then he will live on the fat of the land.’

‘Not likely. If he had written a learned book on a subject that nobody cared about, or been the master of a grammar school, there would be some chance,’ she rejoined scornfully ; ‘but being, as he is, a good churchman, an eloquent preacher, a hard-working priest, and almost a saint upon earth, he will be left on the shelf for ever.’

## CHAPTER XXXVII.

### ‘IN THE NAME!’

A WHITE world outside, with every sharp angle covered with a soft mantle of snow; sad hearts inside the Cottage, with once eager hopes fading with the dying daylight. An urgent message was sent to Lovel ‘to come at once;’ and he answered it in person, with his surplice thrown over his arm. Miss Daphne, with tears in her kindly eyes, led Maude into the dimly-lighted room, and placed her by the Turkish screen. The poor girl cast one eager glance at Sir Paul, as he lay, helpless as a child, with his heavy head propped up by several pillows. His moustaches and eyebrows looked almost black, in contrast with the dead whiteness of his sunken cheeks; and her heart almost stood still through fear, because he was so terribly changed by his illness. He did not open his eyes, possibly because he knew that, if he saw her, he would think of nothing else; and she, thinking that he looked as if he were hovering on the borders of death, felt a sob rise in her throat, and sank down on her knees, shaking from head to foot. But the next moment, the clear, bell-like tones of Lovel’s voice sounded in the solemn words of the Baptismal

service, and stilled her quivering nerves. As she listened, it seemed to her as if it must be a dream. The last time she had seen Paul, he was in the vigour and strength of healthy manhood ; and, as she feared, as far off as ever from the true Faith. Now he was wasted and weak beyond expression ; but oh, happiest of thoughts ! safe in the arms of the Church. Night and day, ever since she first began to find an interest in him, she had prayed for this—prayed with all her heart and soul. She had often been discouraged—sometimes she had nearly given up all hope, but she had never ceased to pray ; and now, like a burst of golden sunshine amidst darkest clouds of storms, came this glorious fruition of her supplications, in what might have been the saddest hour of her life. Her soul rose up in fervent gratitude to Heaven, though her cheeks were wet with tears. Even if he were taken from her, they might meet in a fairer world than this, and she would not have to sorrow like those who have no hope.

The cross of Christ was marked on the forehead of the man who had so long denied Him—the short service was soon ended ; and when the last prayer was said, after a solemn silence, Lovel and Conway went with quiet footsteps out of the room. Maude rose from her knees, and stood with clasped hands, a lovely picture of hesitation. Surely she might have one word, one look, before she went back to her daily life, which might mean—to be shut away from him for ever. Paul's wishes rushed to meet hers.

'Maude,' he said, in a low voice. And she came to him as gladly as a bird to its nest.

She was kneeling by him in a moment, her



two hands clasping the feeble left hand which tried to return their pressure, her lovely face upraised to his, eye meeting eye—one heart speaking to the other.

‘Oh, thank God for this!’ she whispered, with a tremble on her lips.

A very wistful look came into his eyes.

‘You would have had me now?’ And in his tone was all the pain of the cruellest sentence on earth. ‘It might have been,’—a sentence which gives the fiercest sting to a late repentance, and goes far to rob resignation of her jewelled crown.

‘Oh, Paul! Paul!’ It came like a cry from the very depth of her heart, as it rose up wild with longing, and she bent her head to hide the two large tears which were rolling down her cheeks. Must she *always* give up whatever she loved best? It was hard, cruelly hard, and she felt as if her heart *must* break. But the next moment, she was shocked at herself. Had not her fondest prayer been answered; and where was her gratitude if she dared to grumble, because the Blessed Saviour chose to call the new member of His Church from the Church still militant on earth, to the Church triumphant in Heaven? She looked up at him, her long lashes still wet with tears, but a radiant smile on her lovely lips.

‘You have made me *so* happy; and whatever happens now, I can say, “God’s will be done.”’

‘Yes, God’s will be done, but—’ he said no more, but there was a whole volume of struggling hopes in that little word, and he knew that she understood. Then his eyes closed, his head drooped in fatal weakness; and, as Miss Daphne came in with a tonic, Maude stole softly out of the room, and,

without waiting to speak to anyone, got into the carriage and drove home. This was a day to be remembered till the end of her life, a day whose record ought to be written in golden letters. The Christmas bells burst out with a joyous peal, casting their glad greeting far and wide through the frosty air ; and Maude, listening to them with willing ears, repeated softly the angel's song, 'Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace.' For, after long waiting—after the combat ended—after the victory won—peace had come like a white-winged dove, though behind her stood Azrael, the Angel of Death. But Death was no longer a second name for despair ; for, beyond the parting on earth, faith looked forward with shining eyes towards a joyful meeting in Heaven, and sorrow went hand in hand with hope.

## THE EPILOGUE.

### FRUITION.

PATIENTS will sometimes be so very rude as to give a flat contradiction to their doctors, and the invalids of Elmsfield had no respect to the verdict of Dr Hicks. On the day after the fire which had such serious consequences, he announced it as his opinion, that there was no hope for Sir Paul Nugent, but that Miss Julia Goodwin might possibly recover. Miss Goodwin died on Christmas Eve, whilst the Christmas bells were ringing; and Sir Paul slept comfortably the whole night long, and awoke quite refreshed in the morning. From that day he began to revive, and to stretch out feelers, as it were, after his former strength. It is possible that Maude Dashwood gave him the required stimulus, on that afternoon, when she knelt by his side, and told him, at least by the look on her sweet face, that her love had never gone from him. It certainly gave him a new motive for living; and motives are the hidden forces that make history for the world. Sir Paul was able to continue his own story in person, either thanks to this new motive, or to the excellent nursing of the two Miss Singletons. He felt like a ghost when he finally reappeared on the scene of action; and

almost expected some material change to have worked in the place. Out of gratitude to the spinsters (or rather out of a cunning plan to provide chaperons for lady-visitors), he invited them to accompany him on his return to The Chase. They both refused, and then Priscilla consented, as there would be nobody to look after the convalescent, and see that he committed no imprudences; and Daphne came round as it struck her, that somebody else would be sure to make a mistake in measuring out his tonics. It was a pretty sight to see the two small, elderly ladies, in their dove-coloured dresses, and with their snow-white hair, walking through the stately rooms, or hovering with womanly tenderness about the sofa of the man, who was weak enough to need their care, and yet young enough to be the son of either. Landon, Ferrol and Montgomery came down in turn to look after him, but missed the old sympathy which used to be between them, and argued hotly against his change of opinions. They always would have it that this change was due to the emasculated state of his intellect during a severe illness; but he maintained stoutly that his convictions were the result of his researches, and that his intellect was never brighter, or the powers of his mind in better force, than when he finally decided that truth was on the side of Christianity, and that all his life before he had been a fool not to see it. His illness, in fact, had nothing to do with it, for he was already a Christian in heart when he broke into Laburnum Lodge like a burglar, and was carried out like a corpse. His friends laughed, and gave no credit to his assertions; for if there was any truth in them, they were logically bound

to follow his example. Mark Ferrol was often up at the Castle ; and, in the spring, the whole neighbourhood was startled by the announcement of his engagement to Miss Seldon.

‘Consolation stakes!’ remarked Landon drily.

‘I always admired Miss Seldon,’ said Paul quietly. ‘She will make Ferrol an admirable wife. I wonder what I can give her for a present.’

‘A phonograph, with all your interminable conversations bottled up in it. When she doesn’t hit it off with her husband, she could console herself with memories of you.’

‘Very obliging of Ferrol to slip his head into the noose, when there was no hangman to make him do it,’ said Montgomery, who was soured by an expectation which had turned into a disappointment.

‘The marriage of two intellects,’ Lady Mortimer remarked to Maude Dashwood, who had driven over to the Castle to offer her sincere congratulations, ‘with the hearts left out. The progeny ought to be intellectual giants, and moral dwarfs. I look forward to the future with some interest.’

On a lovely morning, when there was a promise of summer in every breath of the soft spring air, Miss Eleanor Dashwood was married to the Rev. Charles Conway, M.A. The Bishop of the diocese came to assist the Rev. Herbert Lovel to perform the ceremony, the Squire gave the bride away (or ‘threw her away,’ as Miss Wyngate would have said, when her temper was high, and her spirits low), and the whole neighbourhood, whether invited or not, insisted on being present

There were many darned skirts and ragged coats amongst the lookers-on, for Hart's Alley had turned out *en masse* to see 'the little missie,' who had been one of their guardian angels for so many years, and was now to be the peculiar angel of the parson for ever. There was a long table laid for them under the trees of the park, which the bride had decked with her own hands, and which showed that she had not forgotten them in the hour of her happiness. Mrs Ward was there in her widow's bonnet, but looking all the better for her immunity from bruises ; and anyone who was lame or feeble had contrived to get a lift in a cart, so as not to be left behind by their more fortunate friends.

Sir Paul Nugent drove over to Beechwood in an open carriage, and was placed on the most comfortable sofa in the drawing-room. The state of his spine was so far improved that he could take a few steps, with the assistance of a strong arm ; and the celebrated surgeon whom he had consulted at the beginning, had assured him, that morning, that his perfect recovery was only a question of time. For many months he had waited in a state of wretched uncertainty ; for he had schooled himself to do his duty, and refrain from asking Maude Dashwood once more to share his life, if that would mean to engage her as an unpaid nurse for a cripple. His friends gathered round him in cordial welcome, for this was his first reappearance in society ; but, of course, the bride was the centre of interest, and they drifted into the hall, and on to the step, to see her depart, all smiles and tears, like a rosebud dashed with dew. After the happy pair had driven off in a neat

brougham, amidst a shower of blessings and good wishes—but without one grain of rice—there was a general exodus into the garden.

Maude looked lovely in a white dress, and a large hat trimmed with soft white feathers; and she had borne herself bravely so long as Nellie was still there. But when the pretty little face was no longer visible, and she realised that the sisterly life together was over for ever, she longed for a moment of peace, and hastened to the drawing-room to find it.

‘Will you be merciful, and come to me?’ asked Sir Paul, raising himself on his elbow, and looking up into her face, as she hurried towards him, with the most loving appreciation in his dark eyes. ‘I’ve heard good news to-day—I’m not to be a useless log all my life.’

‘Is it true?’ breathlessly, the colour coming and going in her cheeks.

‘Quite true,’ gravely, and then, with a quick change of tone, and a sudden light in his eyes, ‘Don’t you know what this means to me? That I have the right to ask you—to be my wife?’ He held out his hands, and drew her gently down to him. ‘I’ve waited long enough, haven’t I?’ he said softly.

The next moment their happy lips met, for the last barrier which duty had set up to part them was broken down; and after long waiting—and watching—and fearing—desire could meet with fruition.

\* \* \* \* \*

One summer’s evening, the Rector of Elmsfield stepped out of the train at the old familiar station, and was met on the platform by the senior curate

of St John's. He was an elderly gentleman, with a good profile, a fascinating smile, and an air of prosperity—perhaps due to his redundant figure, as well as to the superior cloth of his clerical garments. Lovel, who looked the most curious contrast to Dr Abbott, as he sat by his side in the old-fashioned double brougham, hastened to give him the news of the neighbourhood. The Doctor raised his eyebrows to a certain extent at various items; but they went up to the top of his smooth forehead, when he heard of the marriage of Sir Paul Nugent to Miss Dashwood, which had occurred the day before.

'Bless my soul!' he exclaimed, with a long-drawn breath, 'then old Thomas Nugent was a cunning dog, after all. He had this in his crafty old head when he gave those diamonds to the girl, and put that odd condition in the will, binding Paul to make The Chase his place of residence. "They will be thrown together in the natural course of events, and if no busy-body says a word, they'll take to each other as a matter of course. There isn't another girl in the place can hold a candle to Maude Dashwood, and that young rascal of a nephew of mine has got his full share, I'm told, of the Nugent beauty." Those were his very words—and I laughed at him!'

Lovel said nothing, so the Rector employed himself in looking out of the window, and noting the changes which had occurred in his absence. Already everything seemed uninteresting to him, and he was longing to get back to the cheerful foreign society to which he had grown accustomed; and to exchange, the simple rural beauties of the beech-clad hills of Elmsfield, for the blue of the



laughing Mediterranean, and the grandeur of the snow-tipped Alps.

‘Do you know, Lovel,’ he said, after a pause, ‘I’ve come to the conclusion that my duties as a parish priest clash with my literary labours. As I feel that my writings reach a wider sphere, and therefore may do good to society at large, it would go against my conscience to give them up. Ahem! In short, I’m thinking of giving up this place instead; and as you seem to fill it uncommonly well, I’m willing to say a word to the new man in your favour. If he’s a decent sort of fellow, he is sure to take my advice.’

‘He is a very decent sort of fellow, and rather a chum of mine,’ said Lovel quietly, though his face flushed at the thought of having the whole parish in his hands. He did not think that he would live very long; but it had been the wish of his heart to end his days amongst the people who loved him; and, in the place where he had sown so diligently, to see the first green shoots of the future harvest.

‘Ah! then there will be little difficulty in arranging it,’ the Rector rejoined cheerfully.

Need it be said that his appeal resulted in a most cordial letter of acquiescence from Sir Paul Nugent, who said that Herbert Lovel was a necessity to him, and that he never meant to do without him?

THE END.







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## **DR. REDWOOD'S REPORT.**

2, Fisher Street, Red Lion Square, London, W.C., March 24th, 1891.

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